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JULY 2007

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PWI's
State of
the
GAME

from the desk of...

IF VINCE McMAHON gets caught with his pants down (and I don't necessarily mean that figuratively), he can't say he wasn't warned.

Warned by Jimmy the Greek. By Al Campanis. By Opie & Anthony. By George Allen. By Jon Rocker. By Michael Richards. By Mel Gibson. By Tom Cruise. By Don Imus.

Each of these men (yes, Lisa, Liz, and Brandi, I picked up on the common denominator) said or did something that not only got them in trouble, but created a firestorm so hot that, in many cases, their lives were never the same.

I worry about McMahon because he views real-world controversy as financial opportunity. There is nothing he has done with his company that he can't rationalize by claiming it's a reflection of life or the media's portrayal of life. So far, Vince and WWE have somehow avoided their own Don Imus moment. Whether intentional or not, WWE has been able to maintain its status as a billion-dollar public company while still flying under the radar of multi-media scrutiny. Compare the reaction to Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake's "wardrobe malfunction" to Hot Lesbian Action or Lita and Edge's "Live Sex Celebration" or Katie Vick or J.R.'s "operation" or God or even grown men being forced to kiss the boss' hairy ass, and you have to wonder: How does WWE get away with this stuff?

The answer is: They just have, but they might not be so fortunate forever.

Imus called the Rutgers women's basketball team "nappy-headed hos." (*Hmm*, where have you heard those words before?) After listening to his heartfelt apology, one might think that this was an isolated incident. It was not. He's been doing this type of thing for 30 years—and getting away with it. In April, it just so happened to catch up with him. "I'm a good man who said a bad thing," Imus claims—and I believe him. Most of the people listed in the second paragraph of this column could honestly make the same claim, and look what happened to them.

McMahon and his p.r. people have been experts at damage control when the media latches on to things like *Sports Illustrated's* steroid investigation that turned up the names of WWE wrestlers or the times wrestling moves seen on WWE television were blamed for the deaths of children. As serious as those matters are, they can be viewed as isolated incidents that were not necessarily the fault of the company. The Imus incident took on a life of its own because it rekindled universal emotions about race relations and sexism.

Sexism—indeed violence against women—is a common theme in both WWE and TNA, yet it hasn't become a public issue. Racism—particularly the stereotypical references to blacks in this sport—has been an outrage for generations, yet Cryme Tyme street-talks and revels in their ability to get away with petty larceny. Doesn't Rev. Al Sharpton ever channel surf on a Monday night?

Imus was lulled into a false sense of security because he's been free to do what he does for so long. His advertisers knew what his show was about all along and never had a problem, but as soon as things got hot, they headed for the hills. NBC Universal (which happens to own the USA Network and Sci Fi Channel) and CBS (the half-owner of CW) seemed content to ban Imus for two weeks, but that changed when public pressure continued to mount and the advertisers pulled out. McMahon had better be mindful of the changing national climate ushered in by the Imus/Rutgers mess. Sometimes the "cutting edge" can cause a mortal wound.

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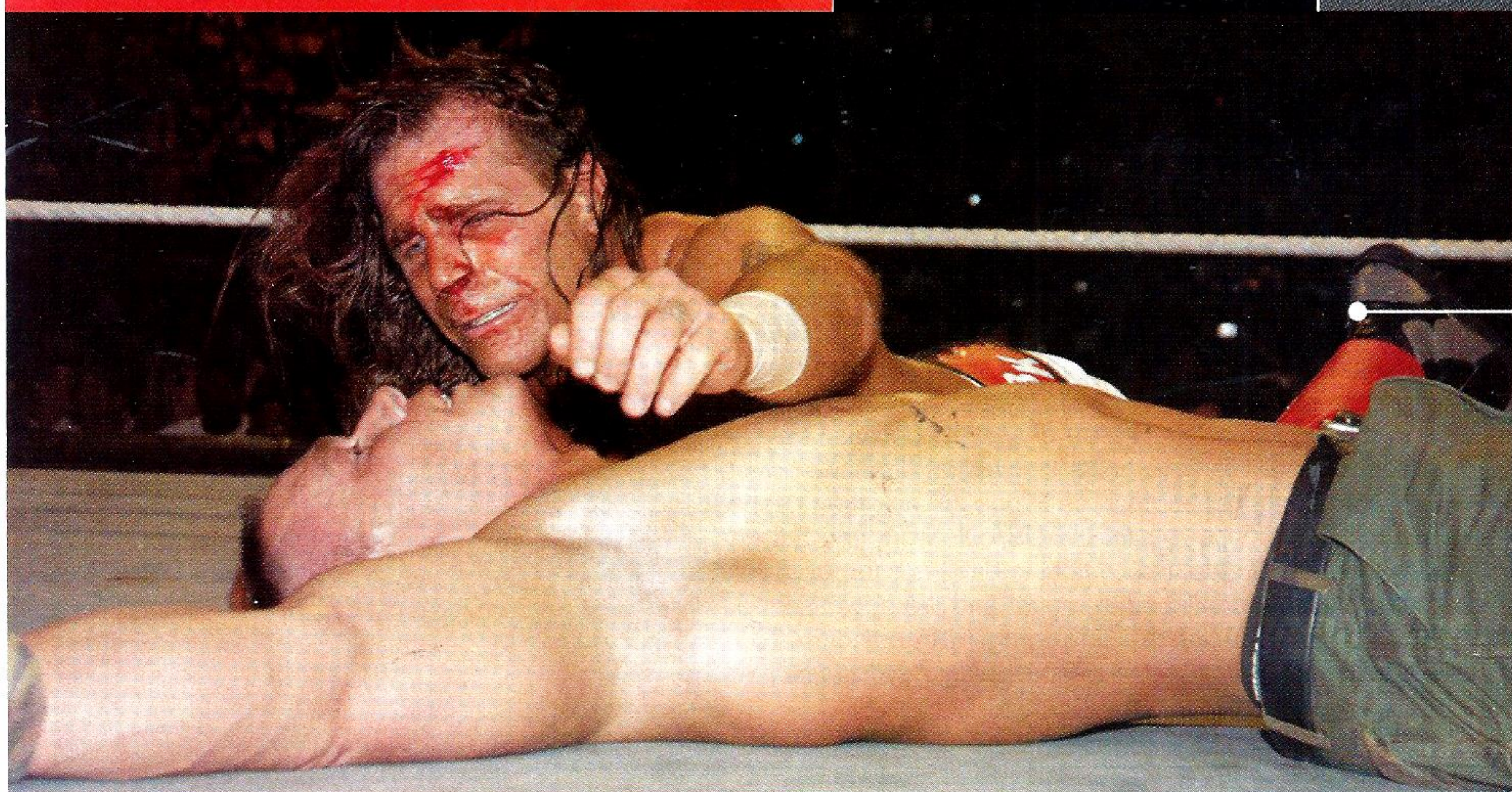
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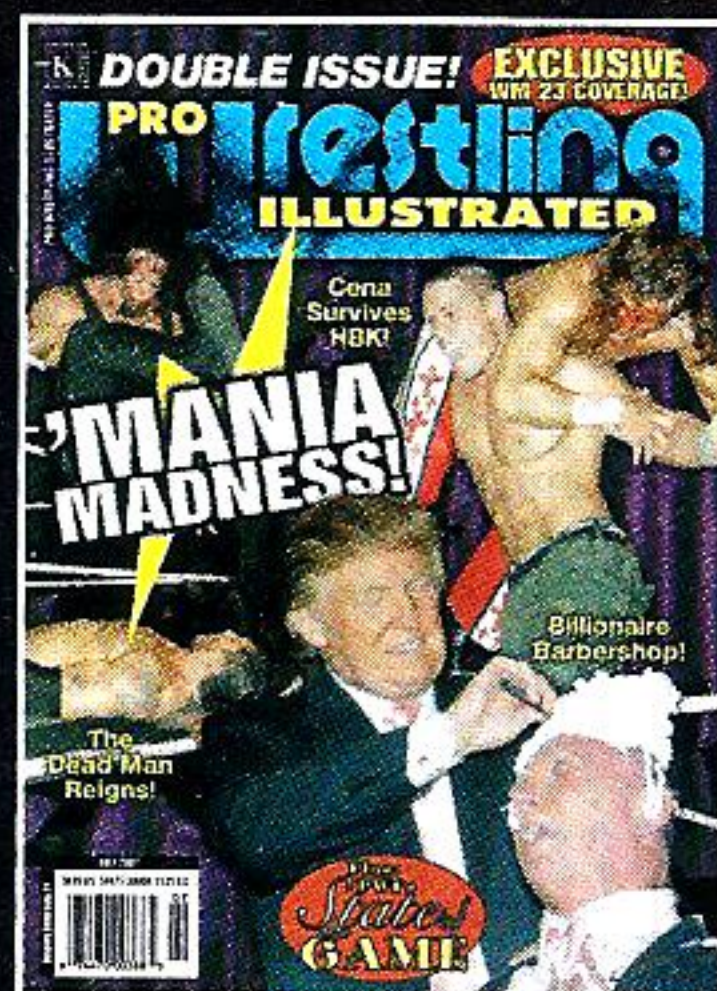
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LOOK FOR THE AUGUST 2007 ISSUE
OF PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED
ON SALE JUNE 26, 2007

before the bell

Compiled by James Guttman

Foley Wouldn't Lie To His Diary, Would He?

Mick Foley always paints an effective picture with his words, luring the reader into the sometimes dark, sometimes humorous mind of Mankind. His latest entry into the Foley library, *The Hardcore Diaries*, is no exception. While WWE is promoting this book as a no-holds-barred examination of the wrestling business, and a critical view of power brokers such as Vince McMahon and Triple-H, fans who pick it up for only that reason are likely to be disappointed. Nevertheless, the book is an absolute must-read.

Written over the course of 2006, with an emphasis on the second ECW One Night Stand pay-per-view, the book offers a fascinating look into the pitch process of WWE. What goes on behind the scenes and in the writers' room at WWE events? How do storylines evolve? Foley reveals how he pitched angles involving ECW and Melina, storylines that were originally very different from what WWE fans saw on TV. He guides us through his personal process of creating a promo, and shares the reality-based anger that fueled his confrontations with Terry Funk heading into One Night Stand.

Make no mistake: There is a lot of Vince McMahon-bashing in the book. Foley even states outright that his friendship with McMahon is over, and they are only coworkers now (stemming primarily from Foley's flirtation with TNA). But the book's non-wrestling content is the most intriguing.

As the title implies, this is Foley's diary, with entries spanning nearly a year. It is written in the same stream

of consciousness that most people's personal diaries or journals are. He will often start on one subject that makes him think of something from the past, and he'll write about it. Some of the best stories involve his children's lives and growth. Foley has never kept his family life secret. Whether it has been in his other books, the *Beyond The Mat* documentary, or in his public appearances, Foley has let his family be a public part of his life and career. Ever since the infamous "Cane Dewey" sign and promo in ECW, fans have watched the Foley kids grow up. Any wrestling fan who happens to have children will enjoy those excerpts.

Another strength of the book is Foley's depiction of the women in WWE. The former Cactus Jack accomplishes, with great skill, a somewhat difficult task: He humanizes the WWE Divas, making them more than just eye candy. Foley portrays these women as sincere, kind individuals. He shows them a measure of respect that is otherwise lacking in the industry, and tells stories of tearful conversations he's shared with them. At the same time, he presents himself as a big brother to the Divas and reiterates his tremendous loyalty to his wife.

One of his other autobiographies was titled *Foley Is Good*, but it is in *Hardcore Diaries* that he becomes great. His raw emotion and skills as a storyteller allow his diaries to become more than just another wrestling autobiography. *Hardcore Diaries* provides a unique insight into a very interesting person.

We give it four suplexes out of five.

—Jake Black



Talkin' Trash

Here's a list of the top 10 wrestling-related things you've been talking about lately and our gut reaction to each.

10. Team 3D open up a smoothie bar called "3D's PowerBlendz." If they're looking to appeal to the health-conscious consumer, they should leave Brother Ray off the advertising posters.

9. Joey Mercury is suddenly released from WWE. **M-N-M: candy, rapper, and former tag team.**

8. Jim Ross is inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame. **A long-overdue acknowledgement of arguably wrestling's best play-by-play man ever.**

7. WWE begins plans to combine the rosters for future pay-per-views. **When all the performers are under one banner, it becomes obvious that no one can match WWE's talent pool.**

6. Mick Foley's new book, *Hardcore Diaries*, cracks the *New York Times* Best Seller List. **How many auto-**

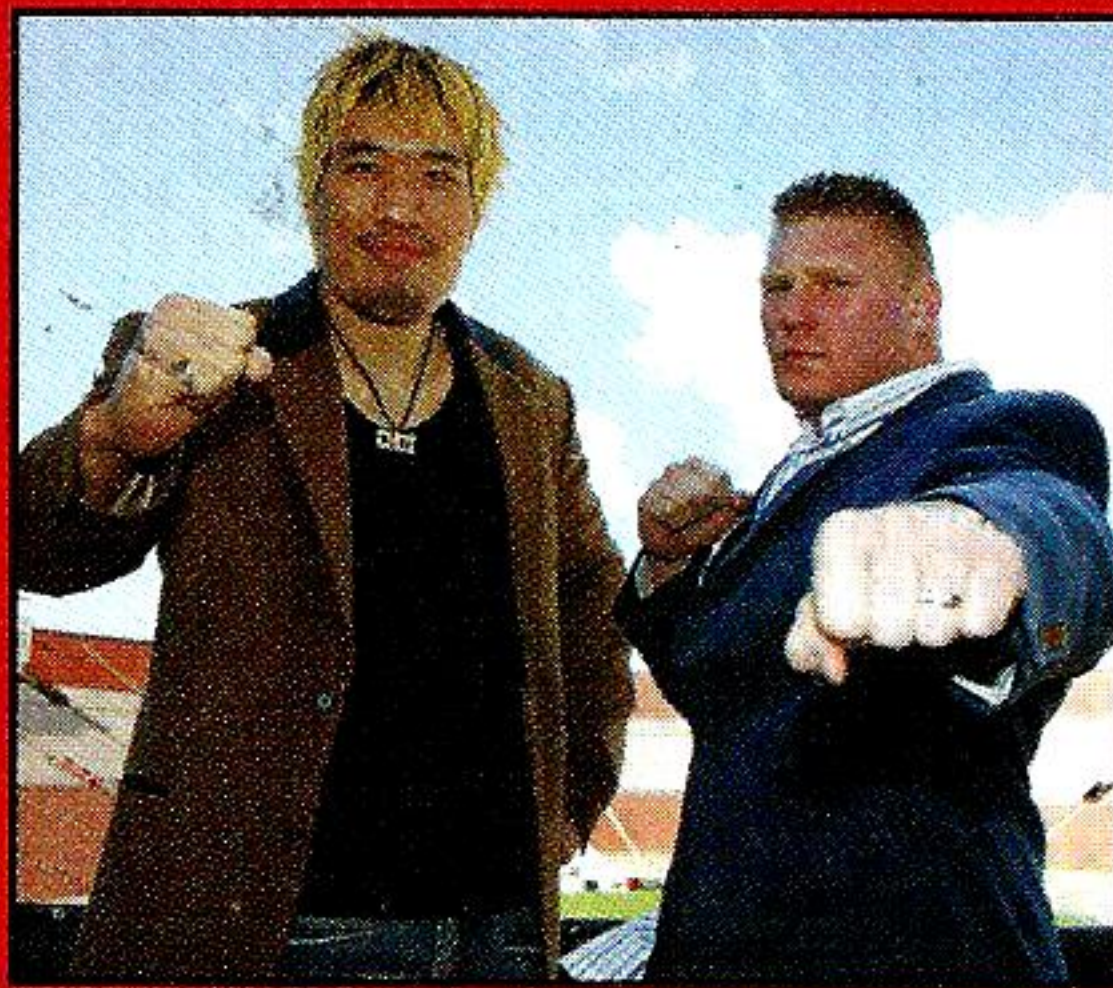


Photo By Tom Casino/Showtime

biographies can one person write? He's like Shirley MacLaine.

5. Brock Lesnar agrees to make his MMA debut for K-1's Heroes promotion. **We wonder if he'll bring his trusty football to the ring and call it "Miss Betsy."**

4. Bret Hart's new book, *My Real Life In The Cartoon World Of Wrestling*, is to be released in September. **"The Hitman" was a bit put off when he realized that the people in charge of shipping it to retailers are Vince McMahon, Earl Hebner, and Shawn Michaels.**

3. *WWE Magazine* claims a total of \$2.5-million was dropped on fans during WWE Raw. **Here. Take this money. Got it? Happy? Good. Now forget all about Katie Vick already!**

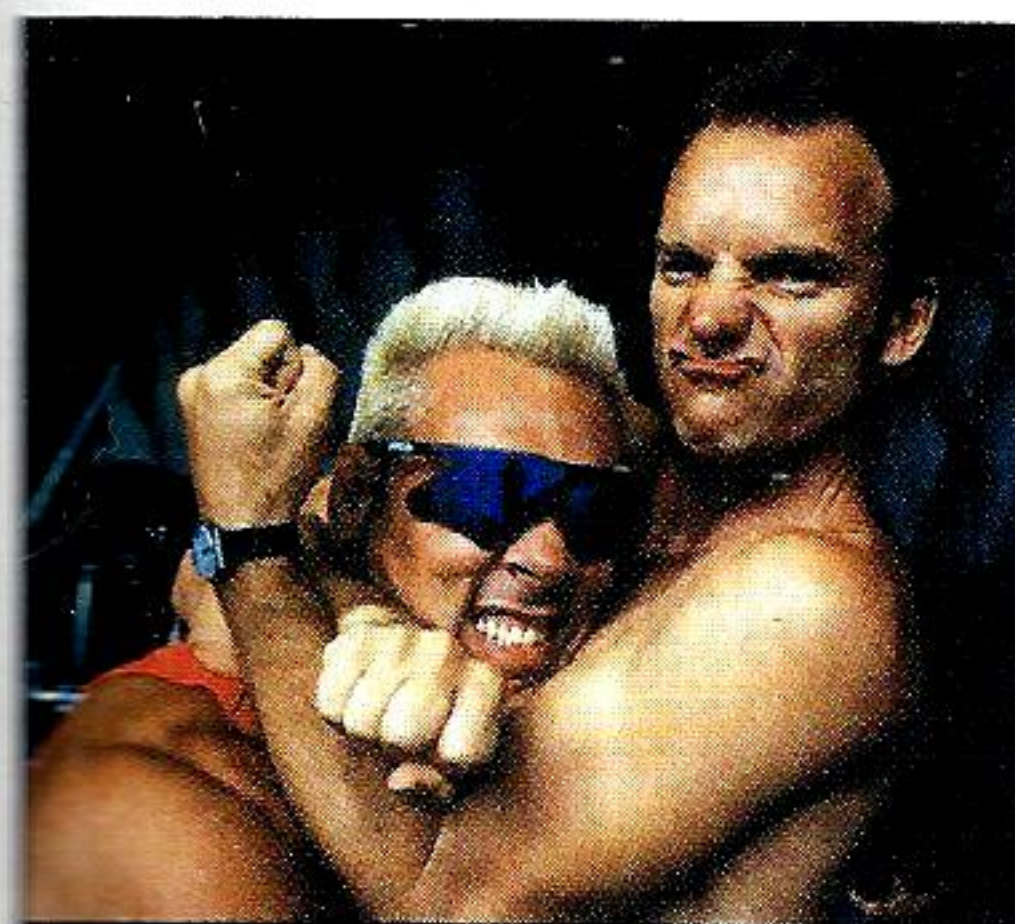
2. Chris Masters joins Jimmy Hart, Chavo Guerrero Jr., and Larry Zbyszko as celebrity medical hair restoration clients. **Did he do medical muscle restoration, too?**

1. *Sports Illustrated* names a number of WWE stars linked to a steroid/drug bust in Florida. **If you need *Sports Illustrated* to tell you there are drugs in wrestling, then you're not paying attention.**

The Internet Insider

The following wrestling-related items were culled from various wrestling websites—or were they? See if you can pick out the items that were actually reported on the Internet (which doesn't necessarily mean they're true) and the ones we blatantly made up. The answers appear at the end of this column on page 9.

1. In a recent interview with Larry King, Sting (the singer) claimed that, in 1999, WCW offered him \$600,000 to work a match against Sting (the wrestler). According to the musical Sting, Ted Turner wanted him to debut, using the song "Every Breath You Take" as his theme. The idea was for him to attack wrestler Sting on an edition of *Nitro* and face him in a "Loser-Changes-His-Name" match on a PPV. The musician



was also offered a membership in the NWO and a brief U.S. title reign. In the end, he turned down the offer.

2. The grand opening of Team 3D's smoothie shop had a rough start. The "brothers" had

been advertising Batista, who credits Devon for helping to launch his WWE career, for the big event. But WWE officials pulled him from the event for obvious reasons. In his place, Brothers Ray and Devon brought in Chris Jericho and Maven. In addition to 3D's PowerBlendz, the former Dudleys are also launching a wrestling school in Kissimmee, Florida. Both men will serve as head trainers.

3. Wrestling fans were recently shocked when it was revealed that The Machines—long believed to be Andre the Giant and Bill Eadie (Demolition Ax) under masks—were actually two different performers. In an interview with a Canadian newspaper, local indy wrestler "Big" Chip Bangladesh explained that he was The Giant Machine and that Ted Arcidi was The Super Machine. Big Chip commented, "I never would have done the gimmick if I knew Andre would get all the credit."

4. WWE had a rough time figuring out who would induct Jerry Lawler into the WWE Hall of Fame. In an interview with *worldwrestlingsanity.com*, "The King" stated that Andy Kaufman would be the man for the spot if he were still alive. The company wanted to have someone mainstream for the honors. An invitation to Jim Carrey was turned down, and Jim Ross wasn't available since he also was being inducted. In the end, William Shatner was chosen because he had been involved in a brief tussle with Lawler on a mid-1990s edition of *Raw*. Shatner, best known to audiences as Captain Kirk and the guy from the *priceline.com* commercials, was happy to induct Lawler into the Hall.

Bizarro 12 Questions With ... Abyss

We value our health, which is why there are certain questions that we'd never ask certain professional wrestlers during an interview. These are those questions:

12. Do you still live in the Asylum? Must be a long drive to Orlando for you.

11. How long before we find out you were burned as a child?

10. We know that you were under Jim Mitchell's power for a while. Tell us the truth. He made you tweeze his crazy eyebrows, didn't he?

9. Can we call you Abby Bear?

8. Why is Sting such a busy body? Doesn't he remind you of Mrs. Kravitz from *Bewitched*?



7. You shot your dad twice in the back, and he survived. What did you use, a BB gun?

6. Sting kept referring to you as "Chris." Are you really Chris Canyon under there? Do TNA officials make you wear the mask because they discriminate against your alternative lifestyle?

5. If you join Christian Cage's "family," does that mean you're in Edge's family too?

4. What were the fans chanting during your "Last Rites" match?

3. Who's nuttier, you or Kurt Angle?

2. Is that the only shirt you own?

1. If your finishing move were a headbutt, would you call it the "black-hole butt"?

We Heard That!

"That is a guaran-damn-tee courtesy of the jabroni-beating—*alalalalalowwww*—pie-eating, death-defying, electrifying, can star in a movie, can catch a pass, still have the ability to layeth the smacketh down on your candy ass! If you smell—*alalalalalowwww*—what The Rock ... is ... cooking."

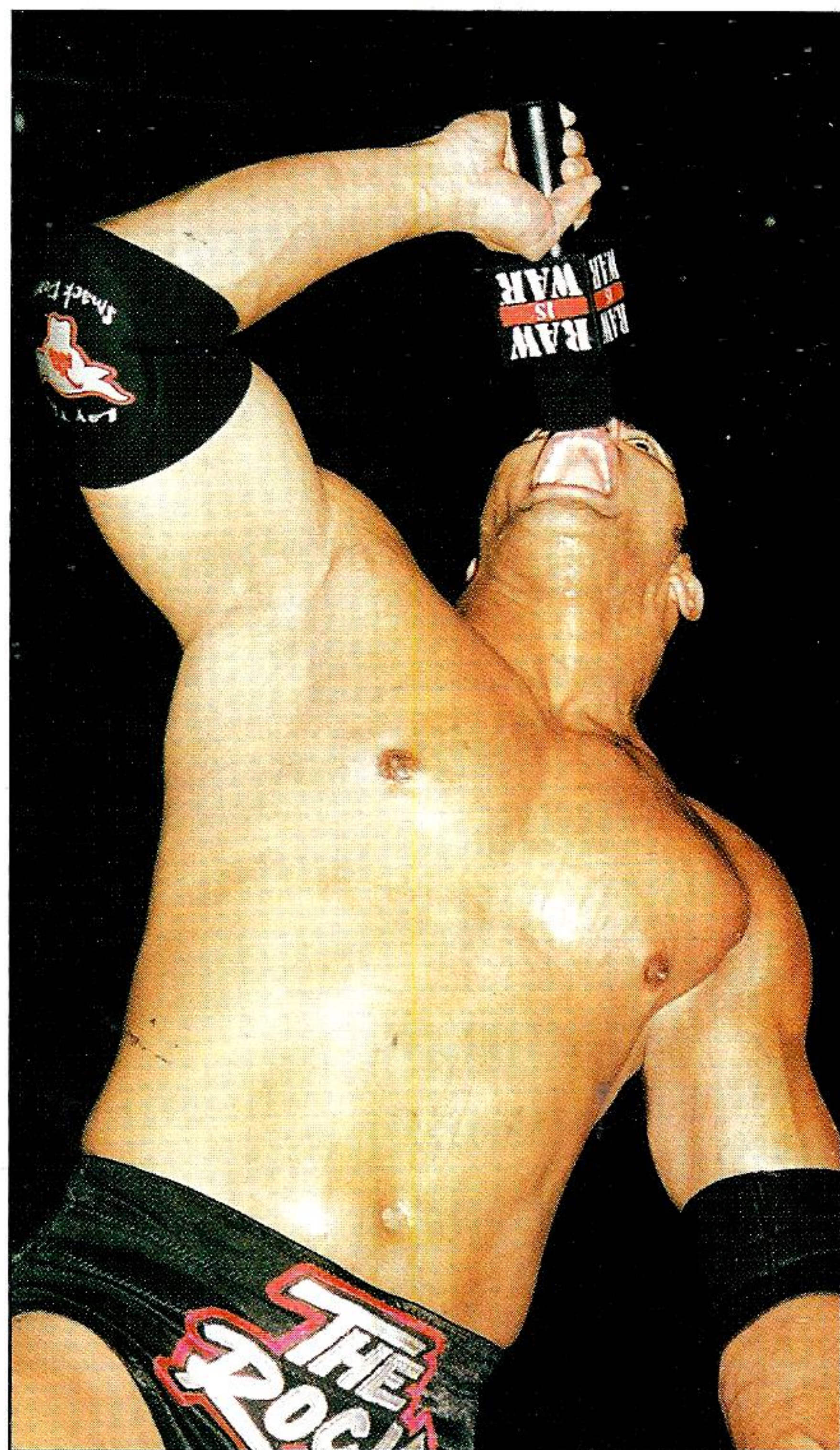
—The Rock, upon his March 13 return to Raw

"I just don't ... like you said, so many things going on that I just don't get the opportunity to watch it. I mean, you know, like, whenever it's on I'm usually doing something more important like sorting my socks, checking my teeth for plaque, or renewing my subscription to *People* magazine. All of these things come up that just feel like they're more important than watching TNA, so I don't get a chance to see it."

—Jerry "The King" Lawler in an interview with worldwrestlinginsanity.com

"I think it's a good opportunity, but I would rather keep Raw with Raw, Smackdown with Smackdown, and ECW with ECW, you know? Otherwise, if it's done too much, it could water down the novelty of it because it is great to do once in a while, especially for the fans to see Shawn Michaels on Smackdown, or like Booker T on Raw. But, I think if you do it too much, it loses its notoriety."

—Chris Benoit in an interview with wrestlemag.com, speaking about WWE's plans to combine the rosters for all future pay-per-views



"So, in closing, to the columnist (not the *Sports Illustrated* columnist, but actually another one) who said a 'roided-up thing called Edge' was at the NHL All-Star Game a few weeks ago, in 2003, this may have been true. Now, not in the least, as my random

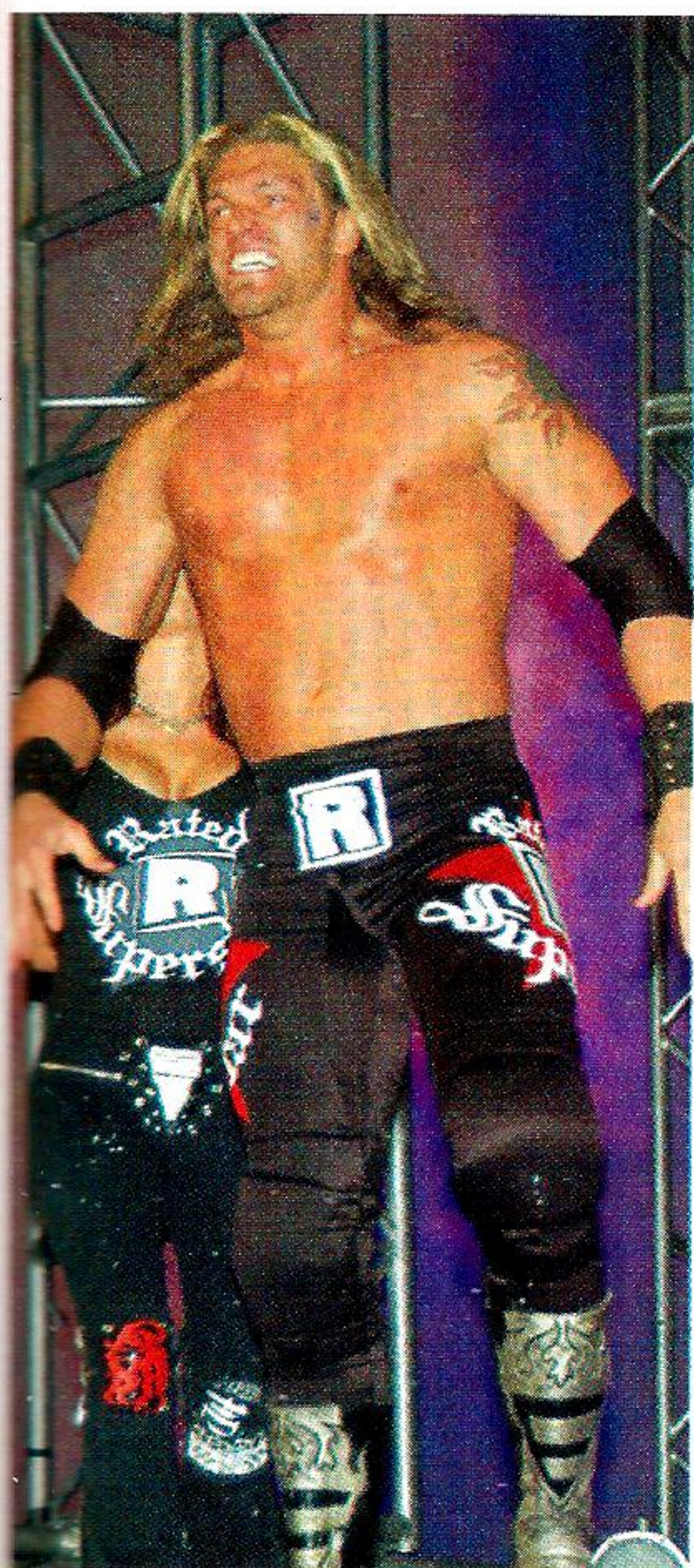
urine tests—which have always been negative—will attest. I guess I'll take the fact that he thought I was as somewhat of a compliment—to the fact that I've been lucky enough to have been gifted with a 6'5", 240-pound body naturally and finally made it to the top of my industry last year on my own, clean as a whistle."

—Edge, responding to the steroid controversy in his MySpace blog

"Pain lets you know you're alive and still in the game."

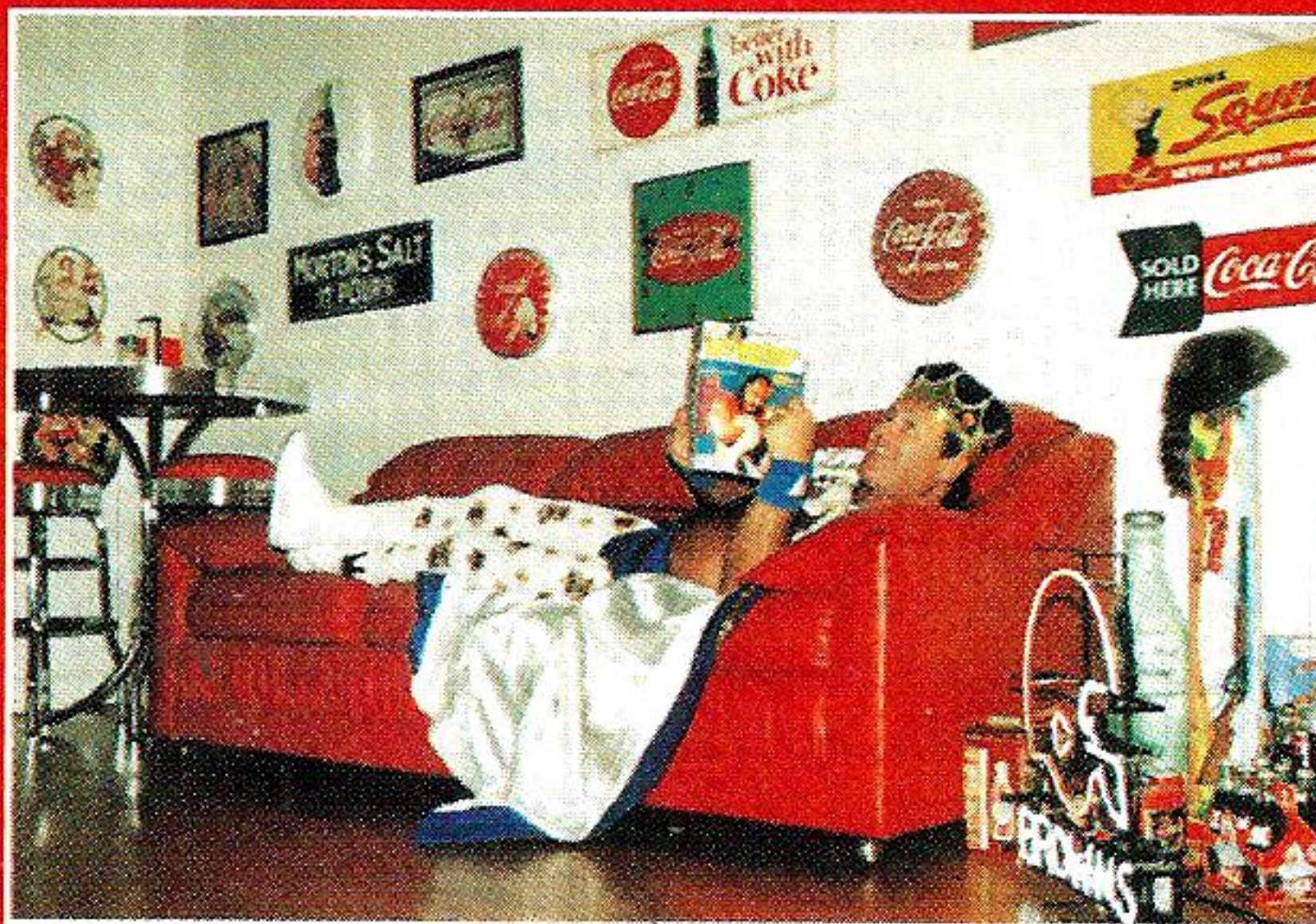
—Magnum T.A., referring to his daily struggles after a car

accident 20 years ago left him partially paralyzed on his left side, *the Virginian-Pilot*



caption me!

Think you're a better writer than the editors at *PWI*? Here's your chance to prove it, punk! This candid shot of "The King of Coca-Cola" resting on his red vinyl couch while enjoying an issue of *The Wrestler* demands a short, concise, and downright uproarious caption. If you think you're up to the task, e-mail your zany quips to prowrestlingillustrated@yahoo.com, or slap a stamp on an envelope and snail-mail it to "Caption Me!," Box 1148, Ft. Washington, PA 19034. Three issues from now, we'll share with you the best of the bunch—and the funnier the better!



March's Best

Andre's first day at kindergarten, age 4.

—Brian K., Lombard, IL

"Hey! Give us back our lunch money!"

—Shaun Stirneman, ststriker@yahoo.com

"Try harder guys! If we can't move him, they'll put us on Smackdown!"

—Drew Fiumara, andrewfiumara@msn.com

"Follow the yellow brick road ... or not!"

—Jarrod Talbott, Winfield, WV

The 1977 holiday rush for the new Atari 2600 was under complete control.

—Gibson Yen, Silver Spring, MD



Answers to Internet Insider:

Items 1 and 3 are totally made up.

ringside

With Bill Meltzer

WHILE IT MAY not have been an artistic masterpiece from a wrestling perspective, WWE's WrestleMania 23 was a staggering financial success. The most lucrative one-day live event in WWE history, grossing more than \$5.38-million in ticket sales alone as a reported 80,103 fans crowded Ford Field.

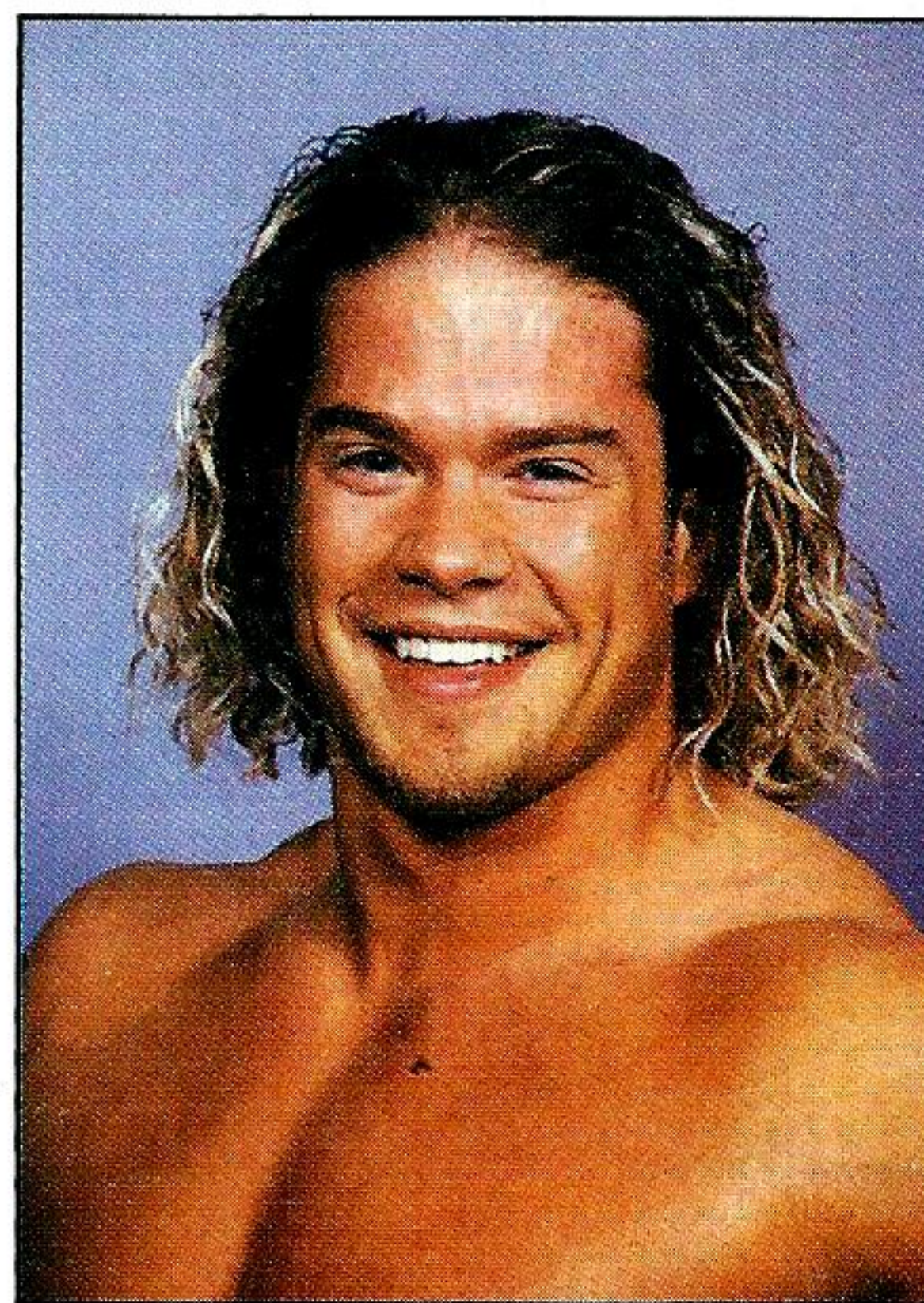
In particular, the hair-vs.-hair match featuring **Donald Trump** in the corner of victorious ECW champion **Bobby Lashley**, and **Vince McMahon** in the corner of **Umaga**, drew widespread national publicity, as did the "Stone-Cold" stunner special guest referee **Steve Austin** delivered to Trump after the match, which received thunderous cheers from the crowd.

For complete details on this historic event, be sure to check out our

WrestleMania coverage beginning on page 74.

John Cena certainly had a great outing at WrestleMania, considering that he defeated **Shawn Michaels** to retain the Raw World title. Cena—championship wrestler, Subway pitchman, and movie star—will now appear in an ABC reality show, *Fast Cars & Superstars: Gillette Young Guns Celebrity Race*. In the seven-episode series, beginning June 7, 12 celebrity drivers will team with six "Gillette Young Guns," which include some of stock car racing's best drivers.

The celebrities include Cena, **Jewel**, **Tony Hawk**, **Serena Williams**, and **William Shatner**. *Fast Cars & Superstars* will follow the celebrities as they train with the drivers, all the way to the season finale in which the drivers will coach the



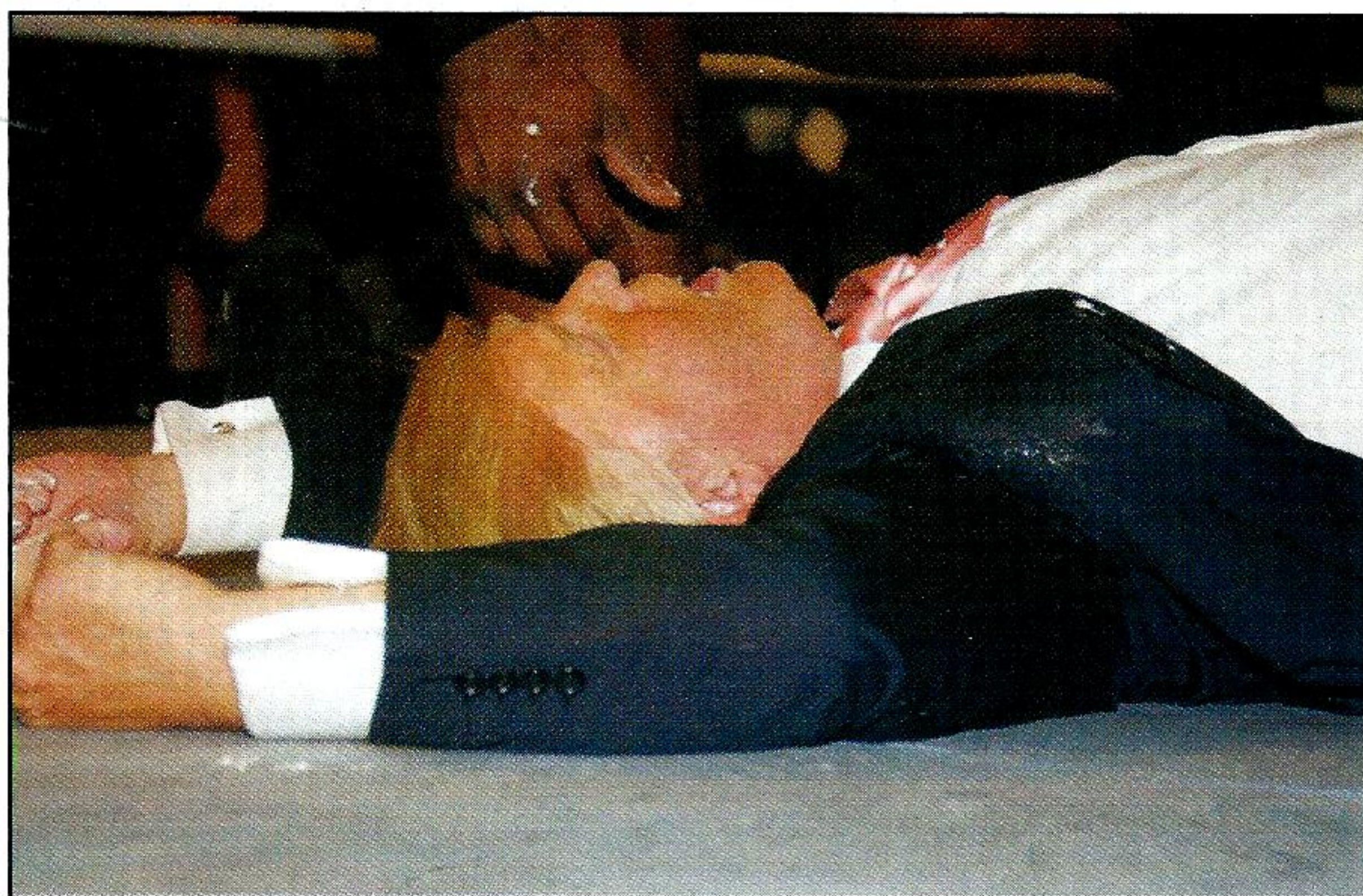
Months of cancer treatment have been rough on Matt Cappotelli, who is fighting a brain tumor. Unfortunately, attempts to minimize the tumor have been unsuccessful. A characteristically optimistic Cappotelli recently announced that, as of press time, surgery was scheduled for May 1.

celebrities from the pits as they compete against each other during a time-trial race. It will be interesting to see whether the champ can excel in another sport.

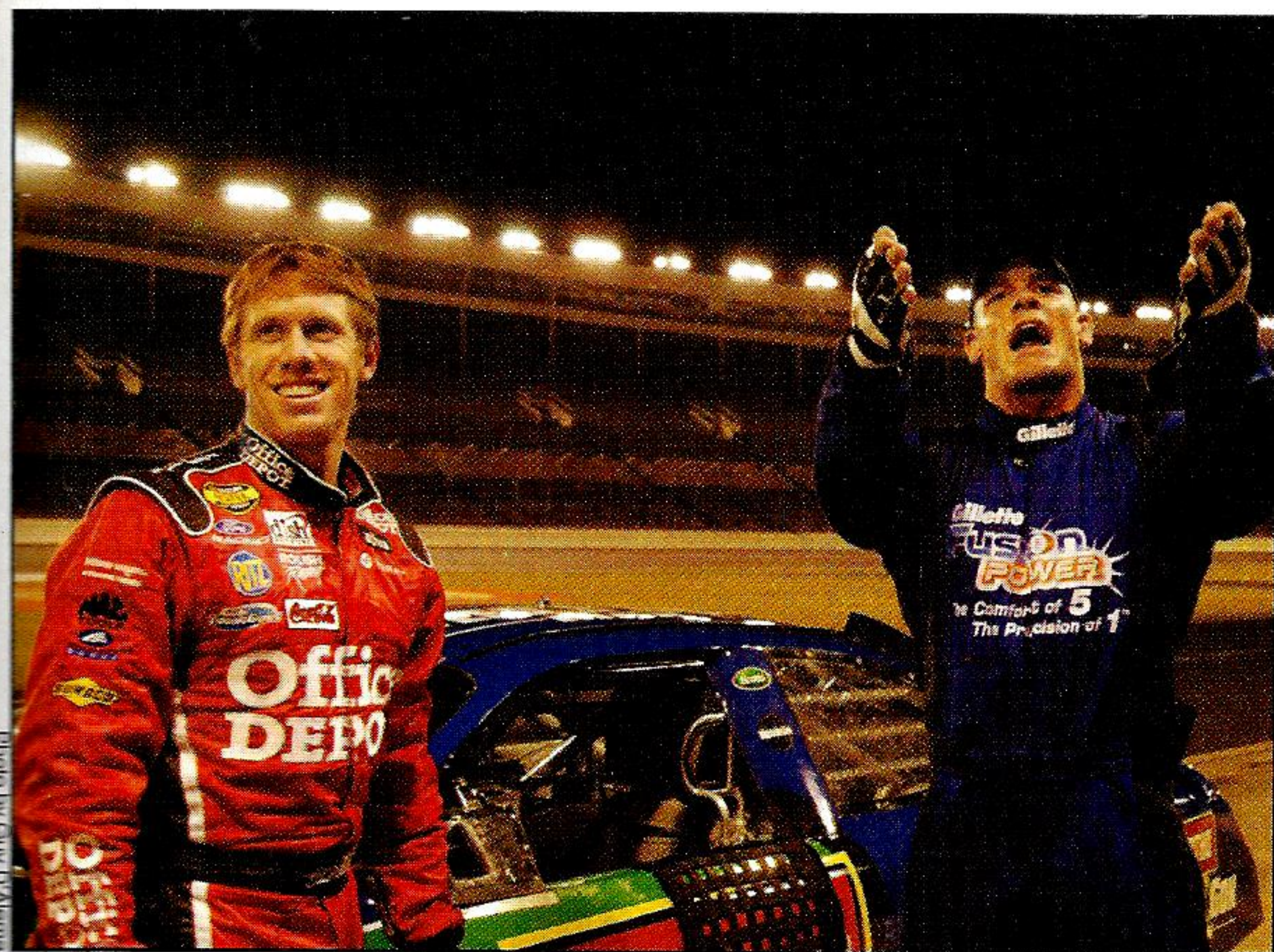
The face of ECW champion Bobby Lashley appears on the promotional poster for this year's One Night Stand pay-per-view, which has been re-christened "WWE One Night Stand" and is being promoted as an event featuring Raw, Smackdown, and ECW competitors. No former ECW wrestlers, outside of those currently competing under the WWE/ECW banner, will be brought in to appear.

Meanwhile, Lashley, a former U.S. Army champion, was chosen for the cover story of *Salute Magazine*, a publication available exclusively on domestic and overseas U.S. military bases. Lashley was honorably discharged with the rank of sergeant. He has often credited his military experience with providing him the discipline necessary to withstand the grind of pro wrestling.

A host of WWE legends were backstage at WrestleMania 23 as guests of the company. Attendees included **Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka**



Record numbers tuned in to see who would get his head shaved, The Donald or Vinnie Mac. Vince walked away minus his follicles, but Trump endured the brunt of a "Stone-Cold" stunner courtesy of the "Texas Rattlesnake" himself, Steve Austin.



John Cena teamed with stock car driver Carl Edwards for the new ABC reality series *Fast Cars & Superstars: Gillette Young Guns Celebrity Race*. Word has it that Cena drove so fast that he said, "You can't see me!" as he left his fellow celebrities in the dust.

and **Haku**. Also on hand were **Chris Nowinski** and current WWE producer **Barry Windham**.

The success of *WrestleMania* temporarily pushed the recent *Sports Illustrated* wrestling-related steroid allegations out of the headlines. Two

weeks before the big event, *SI* published a report stating the names of numerous prominent professional wrestlers—including **Kurt Angle**, **Randy Orton**, **Rey Mysterio Jr.**, and the late **Eddie Guerrero**—were found in client databases of a Florida

wellness center (in Angle's case) and an Alabama compounding pharmacy suspected of being a front for distributing performance-enhancing drugs.

The magazine alleged Angle had received prescriptions for trenbolone and nandrolone, both anabolic steroids. Angle denied the allegation. The active WWE wrestlers thus far declined public comment. WWE spokespeople have stood by the promotion's drug-testing policy.

Wrestling took a backseat to real life for **Matt Cappotelli** when the former Ohio Valley

Wrestling champion and MTV *Tough Enough* winner was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Unfortunately, he recently learned the tumor has grown, and he faces major surgery and subsequent radiation and/or chemotherapy treatments.

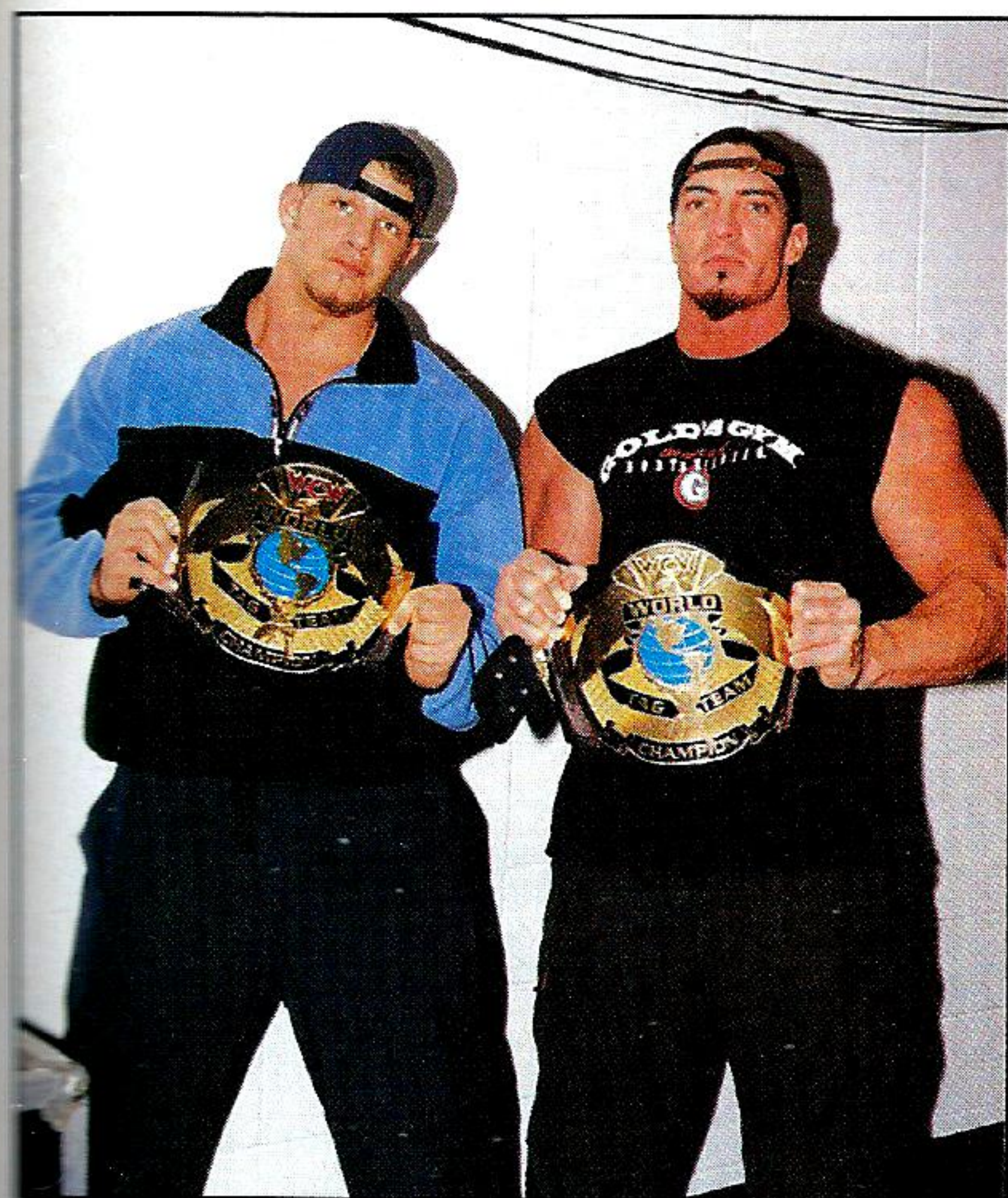
In an emotional appearance at an OVW television taping in Louisville, Kentucky, Cappotelli addressed the spectators at ringside and the TV audience to update his prognosis and thank the fans for all their support. If you would like to send get-well wishes to Matt, you can send an e-mail to keepthefaithmatt@yahoo.com.

TNA's **Jay Lethal** recently granted an extensive interview to the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel* to discuss his "Black Machismo" persona, which he readily admits is heavily based on **Randy "Macho Man" Savage**. Lethal, who has never met Savage but calls the former WWF World champion his biggest wrestling idol, admits he was concerned at first that Savage might take offense to Lethal co-opting his gravelly voiced promo style and several of his in-ring trademarks, including the flying elbow. Ultimately, he decided imitation was the sincerest form of flattery.

Former WCW tag team titlist and NWO member **Buff Bagwell** will be stepping back into his past once again by re-forming both his **American Males** team with **Scotty Riggs**, and **Vicious & Delicious** with **Scott "Flash" Norton**.

Another former WCW tag team champion and WWE wrestler, **Sean O'Haire**, suffered a fractured orbital bone and impaired vision in a recent bar brawl in Hilton Head, South Carolina. A warrant has been issued for the man who injured O'Haire in the fight. No charges have been filed as yet against O'Haire, who quit wrestling in 2004 to train for mixed martial arts competition in Japan. He held the WCW World tag team title with **Mark Jindrak**, a fellow graduate of the WCW Power Plant wrestling school.

The Hilton Head incident is not the first time the 36-year-old O'Haire (whose given name is Sean



After sharing the WCW tag title with Mark Jindrak (left), Sean O'Haire (right) quit wrestling in 2004 to pursue a mixed martial arts career. O'Haire has captured more attention due to his frequent barroom brawls, including a recent incident in Hilton Head, South Carolina.

Christopher Haire) has been involved in controversy outside the ring. On four separate occasions since 2003, Haire was accused of instigating bar fights, although he was convicted only on one occasion and sentenced to time served. In the most notable incident, O'Haire reportedly threw a woman to the floor in a nightclub bathroom, fracturing her tailbone.

King Booker is scheduled to undergo surgery to clean out his knee and repair damaged ligaments. He will miss six to eight weeks of action. In his last pre-injury appearance, Booker was on the receiving end of a tombstone piledriver from Smackdown World champion **The Undertaker**.

Hardcore Holly will also be taking some injury-related time off. He needs to undergo elbow surgery to repair nerve damage. Holly put off the procedure for several months before finally agreeing to it when the pain became virtually unbearable. In his last appearance, Holly dropped a match to **Snitsky**. After the bout, Snitsky proceeded to wedge the Alabaman's arm between the steel steps and repeatedly crash a chair down on the limb. Pennsylvania native Snitsky, by the way, recently shaved off his braided beard, his hair, and even his eyebrows for his new look.

WWE announcer **Jim Ross** had some strong words for **Kurt Angle** in regard to critical comments the gold medalist made about his former employer. In his WWE blog, Ross wrote, "I don't pay attention to what any wrestler, including Kurt Angle, says in a negative way about any subject. These rants are usually a means to draw attention to one's self or to simply generate publicity."

WWE announcer **Todd Grisham** will be following in **Jonathan Coachman**'s footsteps by taking on a sports broadcasting job outside of his WWE work. Grisham will host a Major League Soccer pre-game show on Fox's Soccer Channel. Coachman broadcasts various

sporting events on College Sports Television, a cable and satellite network owned by CBS. He is also a college basketball announcer on Comcast's CN8 network.

The UWF is scheduled to return to the former ECW Arena (now New Alhambra Arena) in Philadelphia for another Hardcore War card in June. No matches were announced as of press time, but TNA stars **Christopher Daniels** and **Team 3D**, along with **Steve Corino**, are reportedly set to appear on the show.

Team 3D's **Brother Devon** recently opened a smoothie shop in Melbourne, Florida. **Chris Jericho** and **Maven** were both on hand for the grand opening.

WWE has released two of its developmental wrestlers working in Deep South Wrestling, sending both **Jon Bolen** and **James Rogers** packing. Back in 2004, Bolen won the TNA "Gutcheck Challenge" in Atlanta, Georgia, and briefly compet-

ed as a TNA preliminary wrestler before working independent shows and signing a WWE developmental deal. In OVW, Bolen teamed with **Ryan Reeves** as **High Dosage**.

Glenn "Disco Inferno" Gilberti was arrested on gambling charges following a raid by Roswell (Georgia) police and ATF agents. According to authorities, a \$10,000 buy-in was required to participate. Gilberti was released on \$10,000 bond.

If you skip ahead to page 104, you'll realize how many wrestling notables have already passed away in 2007. We pay tribute to 11 "wrestling heroes" in that story, and now, unfortunately, we have an even dozen. As we go to press, we have learned that independent wrestler **Darren "Dynamite D" McMillan** died in April after battling cancer. He was a longtime star in Southern California and is best remembered for his run in Xtreme Pro Wrestling a few years ago. □



Team 3D is venturing into business endeavors outside of the ring. At their new training school, Brothers Ray and Devon will lend their ring expertise to burgeoning talent, and Brother Devon's smoothie shop, "3D Powerblendz," will lend a refreshing fruit drink to Orlando natives and tourists alike.

in focus

By Dave Lenker

WHAT I LEARNED AT WRESTLEMANIA 23

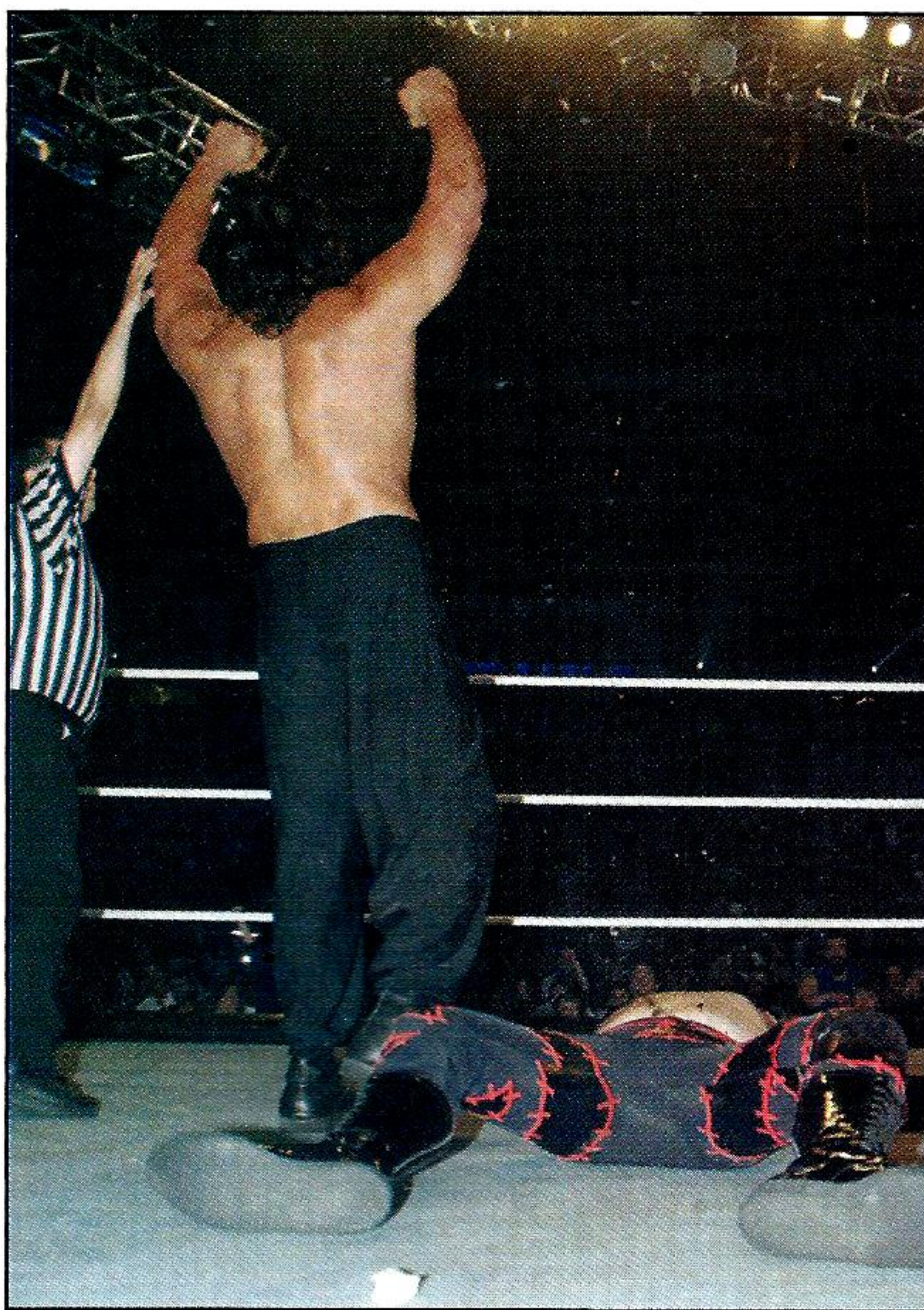
I wasn't among the 80,103 in Detroit on April 1. But just because I watched the show from about 600 miles away, which was only slightly farther away than the folks in the last row at Ford Field, didn't mean I didn't learn a lot in what ranks as the four most important hours on the wrestling calendar each year. In fact, you might say I took a little something out of each of the eight bouts on the pay-per-view. Let's take them in chronological order:

1. THE "MONEY IN THE BANK" LADDER MATCH

I hope the man or woman who came up with this concept has received a big WrestleMania bonus check in each of the past three years and will continue to receive one for as long as this remains a WM tradition. Jeff Hardy gave us this year's biggest MITB thrill when he launched himself off the top of a ladder onto Edge, who was draped across a ladder positioned between the ring apron and the steel barricade.

Ken Kennedy would have been my third choice to win this bout, behind C.M. Punk and the winner of the first MITB, Edge. Edge wasn't

the standout performer in this bout, but he didn't need to be. He's that hot for WWE right now, as witnessed by the reaction to his promo a night later on Raw. Having Edge win MITB for the second time in its three-year existence would have been unorthodox booking, and it would have been really interesting to see when he chose to cash in his title shot this time. In watching this 'Mania opener, I learned that Edge has become too



So maybe no one wanted to see Khali win against Kane, but Kane has reached a standstill and doesn't have anywhere to go at this point. His only existing role is to help create the stars of tomorrow, making Khali the right man to win this match.

good for MITB. He's going to be a huge babyface for WWE when he ultimately decides to turn around all the hatred he has stirred up in WWE fans.

2. KANE VS. THE GREAT KHALI

Not every match has the potential to exceed expectations. The only question surrounding the quality of this battle of super heavyweights was, "Will it be just ugly ... or *really* ugly?" I'd rate it as just ugly. I learned more about Kane than the man who defeated him cleanly with a tree slam. Khali was, is, and will always be a terrible wrestler. Kane is far better. He's a solid wrestler with a solid persona. But there just doesn't seem to be anywhere else to go with him after 10 years in WWE. Can he be rebuilt into the scary monster for the umpteenth time? Should we get another glimpse into his softer side? Perhaps he could be Vicki Guerrero's

new love interest. Please no. Kane just doesn't have the ability to reinvent himself the way the man once known as his brother, The Undertaker, has. Maybe it's time for him to settle into a role as a maker of future stars. Scary thought, but the right man won here.

3. CHRIS BENOIT VS. MVP

Who would have expected this to be an actual wrestling match? MVP a mat specialist? I hadn't an inkling. Nevertheless, this match was just kind of there. Nothing glaringly wrong with it, but it just didn't make sense in the context of this mega-event. Did I miss the hype? It was easy to forget it happened by the time Raw began the following evening. I was surprised that MVP didn't win the U.S. title from Benoit. A secondary championship does little for "The Rabid Wolverine" at this point in his career. I figured that out long before watching WM 23. But I didn't know much about MVP's technical skills. Maybe if it hadn't



Benoit vs. MVP? It wasn't a bad match, but it was a match that many forgot was going to happen and that we forgot happened immediately after it ended. Surprisingly, MVP held his own against the veteran mat technician, but Benoit walked away with his U.S. title intact.

taken us this long to learn about them, we wouldn't have so much trouble taking him and his silly persona seriously.

4. BATISTA VS. THE UNDERTAKER

I've been critical of Batista's skills and dedication of late, and I'm hardly the only one. Had this match been signed a year ago, big Dave would have been the favorite. As April 1, 2007, drew near, "The Animal" wasn't given much of a chance by most. He must have finally heard the whispers or started believing his own (negative) press clippings. I recently wondered if Batista had peaked two years ago in his feud with Triple-H. Maybe he didn't. I think the match with 'Taker was Batista's best to date. Turns out motivation to prove people wrong really goes a long way toward determining match quality. Let's just hope that it isn't only WrestleMania and an opponent the quality of UT that can get Batista motivated.

5. TOMMY DREAMER, SABU, ROB VAN DAM, & THE SANDMAN VS. MARCUS COR VON, KEVIN THORN, MATT STRIKER, & ELIJAH BURKE

Count me as one of many observers who never expected to see The Sandman, Sabu, and/or Tommy Dreamer on the WrestleMania stage.

I learned after watching this one that Vince McMahon does actually give a damn about ECW history. A very small damn anyway. Not only did he give this bout valuable time at WrestleMania, but the ECW Originals actually won. Be very, very surprised if Dreamer, Sabu, or Sandman is on any WWE roster by the time WrestleMania 24 rolls around.

6. BOBBY LASHLEY VS. UMAGA ("BATTLE OF THE BILLIONAIRES")

We could argue that it didn't matter which wrestlers were representing the hairs of Vince McMahon and Donald Trump in this bout. Almost coulda been Viscera and Eugene. This was all about creating a *SportsCenter* moment that would get play not just on *SportsCenter*. WWE got that when Trump clotheslined Vince. Actually, however, it did matter who the combatants were. It was a huge boost for both men, and the match itself was good if not great. In the short term, Lashley got a huge boost from this. In the long term, I'm not so sure. He doesn't have one-tenth the chemistry Steve Austin has with Vince McMahon. Did you notice that the chants were for Austin and not Lashley when Vince came to the ring the next night on Raw? Lashley still needs some work in the ring and a lot more when it comes to promos. I

can feel the fan backlash against him already starting. John Cena has the charisma to feed off that and remain a strong babyface. I'm not convinced things are going to work as well for Lashley. And I'm not sure he has a great upside as a heel, either.

7. MELINA VS. ASHLEY

I must confess I learned little in watching this match. I already knew that it's nice to have a convenient spot for a bathroom break during a long card. I already knew Ashley was a lousy wrestler. I suppose I learned that it's good to have plenty of gorgeous Divas surrounding the ring for distraction purposes if I'm going to be forced to watch a bad women's match. Oh, and this recent WWE tradition of pushing the latest Diva to appear nude in *Playboy* in a WrestleMania bout is getting very old very quickly. Let's hope Mickie James or Victoria or even Nattie Neidhart gets the call from Hef in 2008.

8. JOHN CENA VS. SHAWN MICHAELS

HBK was at his WrestleMania best, but we knew he would be. "The Showstopper" didn't stop or steal the show this year, but frankly, he didn't need to do so. He did a lot to make this a very good main event of a very good WrestleMania. Cena showed me that, although he probably won't ever be a great technician/ring general (à la Michaels), he keeps getting better and better in each facet of his game. WWE was smart to over-push him early in his WWE career. But what occurred to me shortly after the show was over was that this WrestleMania didn't need a man named Triple-H. I didn't miss him. Had he not gotten hurt, it almost certainly would have been "The Game" against Cena in this spot. WWE will be smart to push Triple-H's return hard later this year, but at WrestleMania 24, Cena should finally be ready to carry a lesser star to a very good match. □

off the top rope

By Brandi Mankiewicz

If you wish to contribute to Brandi's mailbag, send your letters to:
TOP ROPE Box 1148 Ft. Washington, PA 19034
Or send e-mail to: offthetopope@yahoo.com

(Editor's note: The opinions expressed in this column are those of the letter writers and Brandi Mankiewicz herself. They do not necessarily reflect the editorial views of this magazine.)

ONE OF THE highlights of my month is the sack of mail I receive from you dear readers. It's almost heart-warming to think that many of you still don't have the brains to use the Internet to send me an e-mail. Of course, as I open each crusted envelope and smell the sickening stench of stale cigarette smoke, I do appreciate those who use e-mail just a little more.

Some snail mail, though, is understandable and appreciated on a much different level: prisoner mail. Not a month goes by without some jumpsuit-wearing convict wanting to chime in with his two cents about the goings on in the wrestling world. This month is no exception. It's nice to know that a magazine devoted to fat men in bathing suits beating the crap out of each other isn't considered contraband by the penal system. Something tells me most of the dudes who write me from their cells find that attractive ... or at least usual.

As your queen, I promise that if I ever wind up in jail, I'll write Stu Saks a letter for publication. As your champion, I promise to write one every day.

Dear Brandi,

I'm writing you in regard to your March 2007 column asking fans what's wrong with wrestling today. I'm gonna start with my biggest disappointment: ECW. I think the problem is there are so few extreme matches. I mean, I thought it was Extreme Championship Wrestling, not the AWA. People complain there are too many WWE stars in ECW, but I feel most of them belong. For example, Hardcore Holly, Matt Striker, and Elijah Burke all belong in ECW and will be best used in that brand. Guys like Bobby Lashley, C.M. Punk, Daivari, Sylvester Terkay, and Mike Knox could be better used in other brands. Unfortunately, there are no tag team or backup divisions. I feel that ECW is not being given a fair shake.

Next is TNA. The only thing I have to say is "two-hour show." Other than that, I like what I see. Raw and Smackdown need to stop doing the same old feuds and switch up their damn rosters.

Last, I'd like to thank you, Brandi, for keeping it real with these so-called wrestling fans. They need to respect John Cena. He's the closest thing to a

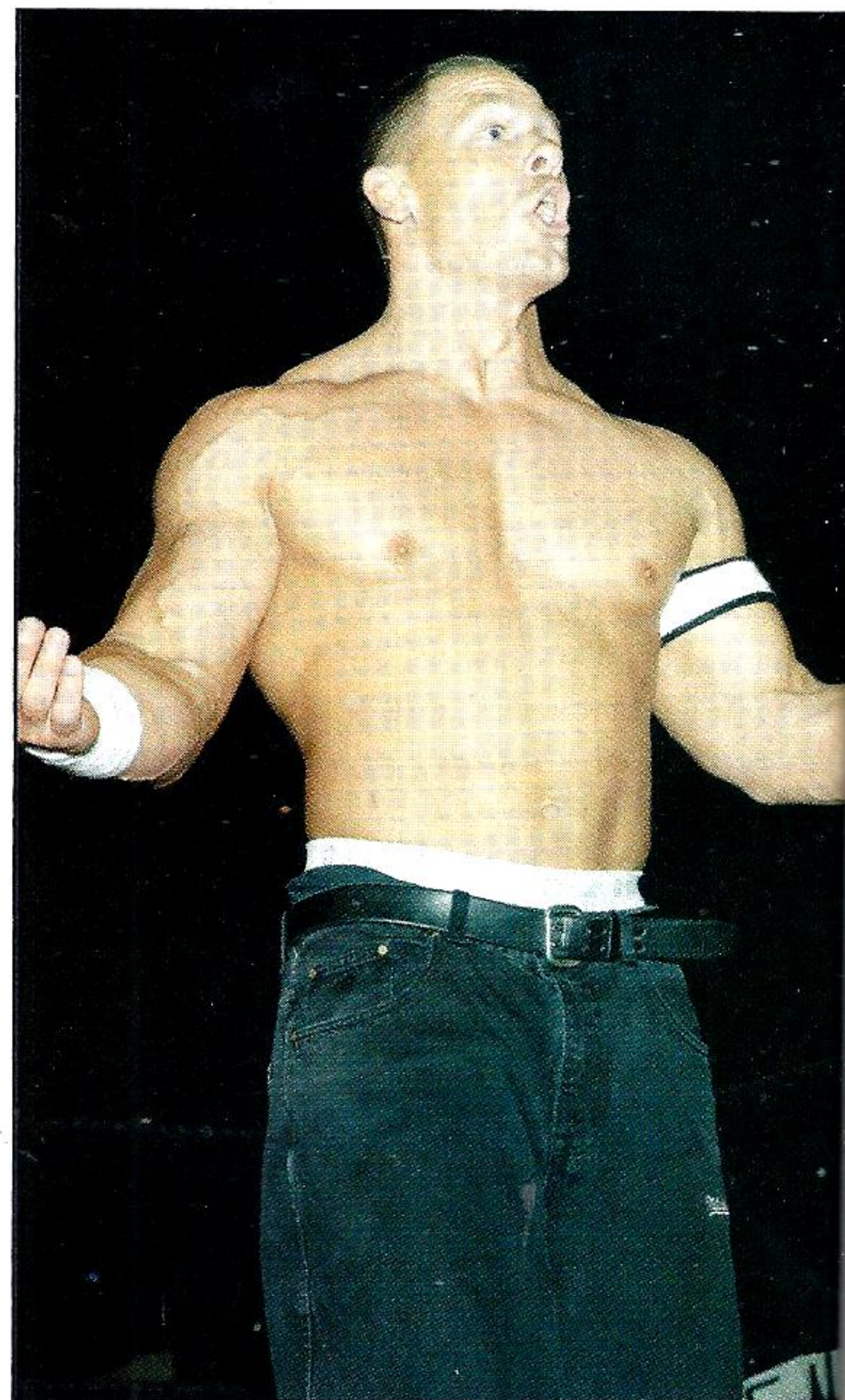
replacement for "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin we have. I know you don't like him, but you have to respect him.

ZULITE THE GREAT
Spanaway, WA

Dear Zoo Light,

So, help me understand one thing. From the pronunciation of your name, I gather you hang from the ceiling to give radiant warmth to pandas while hordes of ticket-buyers shuffle past a thick window so they can gawk at the beast. Or, wait ... were you the one who fostered that cute little polar bear cub only to piss off PETA enough to call for the furball's death? My opinion of you greatly hinges on which is the correct answer. You must let me know.

I can see your point about ECW. This version is nothing like the original, mainly because the roster



My message to Zulite the Great of Spanaway, Washington: Cena ain't no "Stone-Cold," but then again, "Stone-Cold" doesn't impress me either. I hope dear reader Sebastian, in particular, enjoys this shot of the "Doctor Of Thuganomics."

can actually cash its paychecks. ECW 2.0 is no better than the hallowed AWA, as far as I'm concerned. Granted, this version of "WWE lite" should help guys like Lashley launch lucrative careers. I just wish we didn't have to see guys like Mike Knox in the process. I'd take Greg Gagne over Knox any day. Hell, thinking of ECW vs. AWA, I'd love to see Col. DeBeers take on C.M. Punk in an extreme hardcore match. My money would be on the Colonel. He was a crafty dude.

Last, I know you'd like to think otherwise, but, no, I don't respect John Cena. He's nowhere near Steve Austin in terms of intelligence and originality. Of course, I don't like Austin, either, but he's a crapload more entertaining than Cena ever will be. And that's the bottom line.

Yo Brandi,

TNA sucks. The only reason Christian Cage is World champion is because Jeff "The Jerk" Jarrett has never been nor will ever be a true wrestling superstar. None of TNA's "world champs" would ever be respectable WWE Intercontinental champs. Sting is too old-fashioned, Jarrett is a never-was, and everyone else is complaining about never getting a shot at being World champion.

CASSIDY
Foley, MN

Yo Cassidy,

Now, I'm not the biggest TNA fan in the world, but how can you possibly ignore Jeff Jarrett's accomplishments? Sure, I've been critical of him in the past—and I may very well be critical of him again by the end of this reply—but I don't deny him his greatness. Jarrett did more in this business by the time he was 21 than most wrestlers ever will in their careers. From Memphis to WCW to WWE, he's always proven himself to be one the best. I'm sure your pea brain can't comprehend any of this. He's always been on my short list of favorite wrestlers to watch because



Even though Jarrett wasn't my favorite NWA World champion, you can't deny his worth in the wrestling industry. Too many people today overlook his past accomplishments and contributions to the game. His time in the ring has passed though. Stick to management, Jeff.

of his use of old-school psychology. I'm a sucker for a 90-minute headlock in the Mid-South Coliseum. Jarrett could do that—and have the fans eating out of his hand the entire time.

Now for the negative: Jarrett's had his day. I understand that TNA was built on his back, but he needs to step through the ropes for the last time. If he wants to be corporate, he needs to wear a suit instead of donning tights. Jeff learned a lot about the business from his dad, legendary promoter Jerry Jarrett, but I guess Jerry never taught his son about that.

Letter of the Month (printed verbatim from actual letters to share my torture with you all):

Dear Brandi

I'm tired Of John Cena on almost all the front cover of the PWI Magazine. I see him on 2 magazine is on 1, in the wrestler/Inside wrestling special to. When I got my february issue on the mail I saw it, then I got the march issue then again, even on the february 2005 of PWI. You goto put someone else like sting, undertaker, edge, christian cage. But no more cena. I hate that guy.

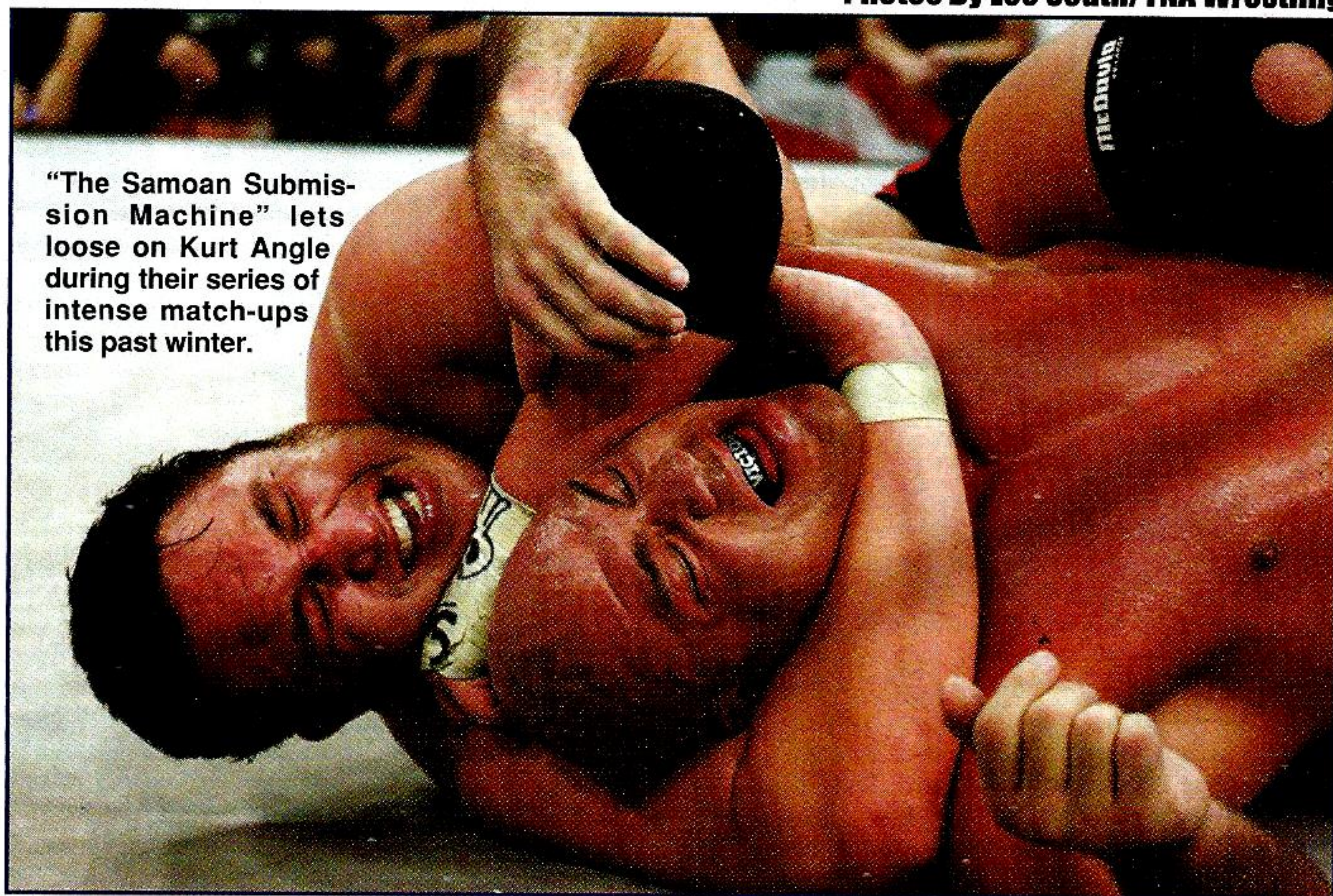
SEBASTIAN B
Compton, CA

Dear Sebastian,

If you didn't like the cover of *The Wrestler/Inside Wrestling* that featured yet another boring pose of John Cena, why didn't you just turn the magazine over to see the other cover instead? The magazine does have two covers. □

press conference

Photos By Lee South/TNA Wrestling



"The Samoan Submission Machine" lets loose on Kurt Angle during their series of intense match-ups this past winter.

SAMOA JOE

SAMOA JOE IS living proof that legitimate talent and toughness still matter in pro wrestling. The winner of **Pro Wrestling Illustrated's** Most Popular Wrestler of the Year Award for 2006, Joe is hardly the classic "babyface" wrestler. He has never courted fan support, and he exhibits a considerable mean streak in the ring. Moreover, he possesses neither a bodybuilder's physique nor a desire to entertain fans on the microphone.

What "The Samoan Submission Machine" possesses is a repertoire of devastating moves, the ability to deliver and absorb punishment, and the stamina to maintain his intensity during long matches. After engaging in a brutal series of matches with Kurt Angle that became instant classics, Joe has set his sights on the NWA World heavyweight championship. The challenger's reputation is such that it would be shocking if he fails to win the title and hold the belt for a considerable period of time.

Joe's departure from Ring of Honor earlier this year signals that he is very serious about this goal. Considering his amazing following in that promotion, and his unprecedented 21-month reign as its champion, Joe's split from ROH was a true turning point in his career. It's no wonder that his recent farewell tour attracted legions of his fans in the United States and United Kingdom.

As serious and intense as he is within the confines of a wrestling arena, Joe is laid back, articulate, and funny away from TNA's hexagonal ring. When he's not blogging for his fans on his website, he's usually happy to discuss anything but wrestling. Fortunately, Joe was in the mood to banter about the professional goings-on in his life when **PWI** Senior Writer Frank Krewda and Contributing Writers Bill Meltzer and Al Alven recently caught up with him.

BILL MELTZER: Last time we spoke, Joe, you were still fairly new to TNA and were dominating the X division. Now you're the top challenger for the NWA World championship. How would you describe the changes, both in TNA and your own career over the last year-and-a-half?

SAMOA JOE: I'd describe it this way: When I go out in public nowadays, people who aren't wrestling fans tell me I look familiar and ask where they've seen me before. The ones who are wrestling fans—not just the hardcore fans—want to be a buy me a drink or lunch and have their picture taken. It's a pretty big change.

Frank. Going up against Angle has been incredible. He only knows one way to wrestle, and that's all-out, which is the same way I am. Some guys get [upset] if you hit them with a really stiff shot. Angle gets mad if you don't. Same thing with Kobashi. Both of them are genuine greats—big, bad dudes who can take the pain and certainly can dish it out. You never have to psych yourself up for matches like those.

AL ALVEN: Where does your own ferocity come from in the ring? You turn into a different person as soon as you step inside the arena. That death stare of yours alone is one of the most intimidating sights in the business.

“When there's another man out there who wants to bust you up, take away the things you've worked to achieve, make the ring his instead of yours, it's pretty easy to get in the frame of mind to destroy anyone in your way.”

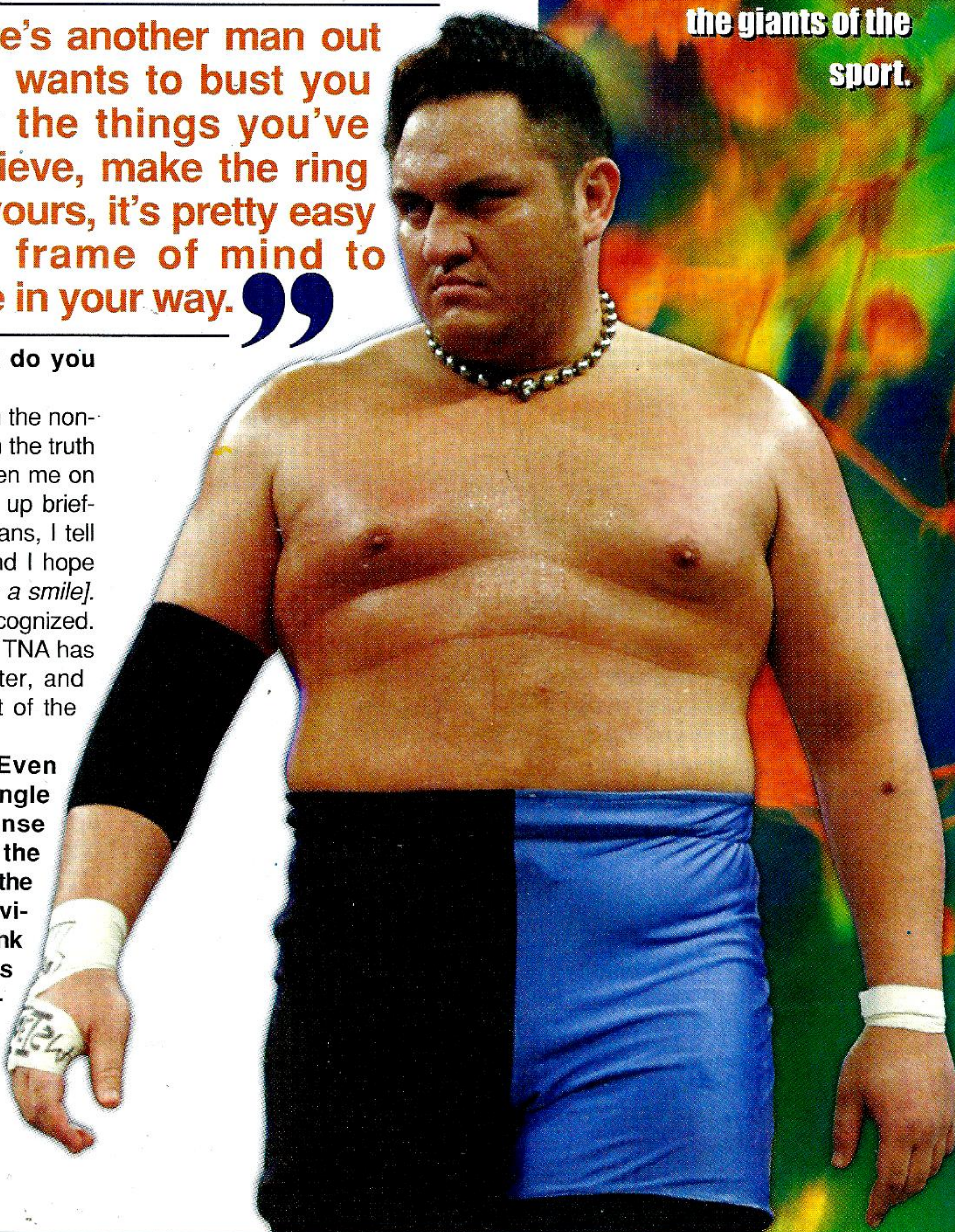
MELTZER: And what do you tell them?

JOE: *[Stone-faced]* With the non-wrestling fans, I just tell 'em the truth ... that I'm sure they've seen me on *Deal Or No Deal*, opening up briefcases. With the wrestling fans, I tell them to pull up a chair, and I hope their credit is good *[Cracks a smile]*. Nah, it's just good to get recognized. The quality of the roster on TNA has just gotten better and better, and it's been nice to be a part of the growth of the promotion.

FRANK KREWDA: Even though you and Kurt Angle developed a really intense rivalry right off the bat, the level of respect between the two of you was very obvious. Where would you rank your series of matches with him against, say, facing Kenta Kobashi?

JOE: I leave the rankings up to other people,

Every issue, reporters from PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED will participate in an incisive press conference with a top wrestling star. The questions will be demanding. And the answers will reveal the innermost thoughts of the giants of the sport.





Outside of the ring, Joe is a wisecracking, fun-loving, barbecue-eating mountain of a man, but inside the ring, the winner of *PWI*'s 2006 Most Popular Wrestler Award is all business, even standing up to Hall of Famer Kurt Angle.



Photo by Joe Zanolle

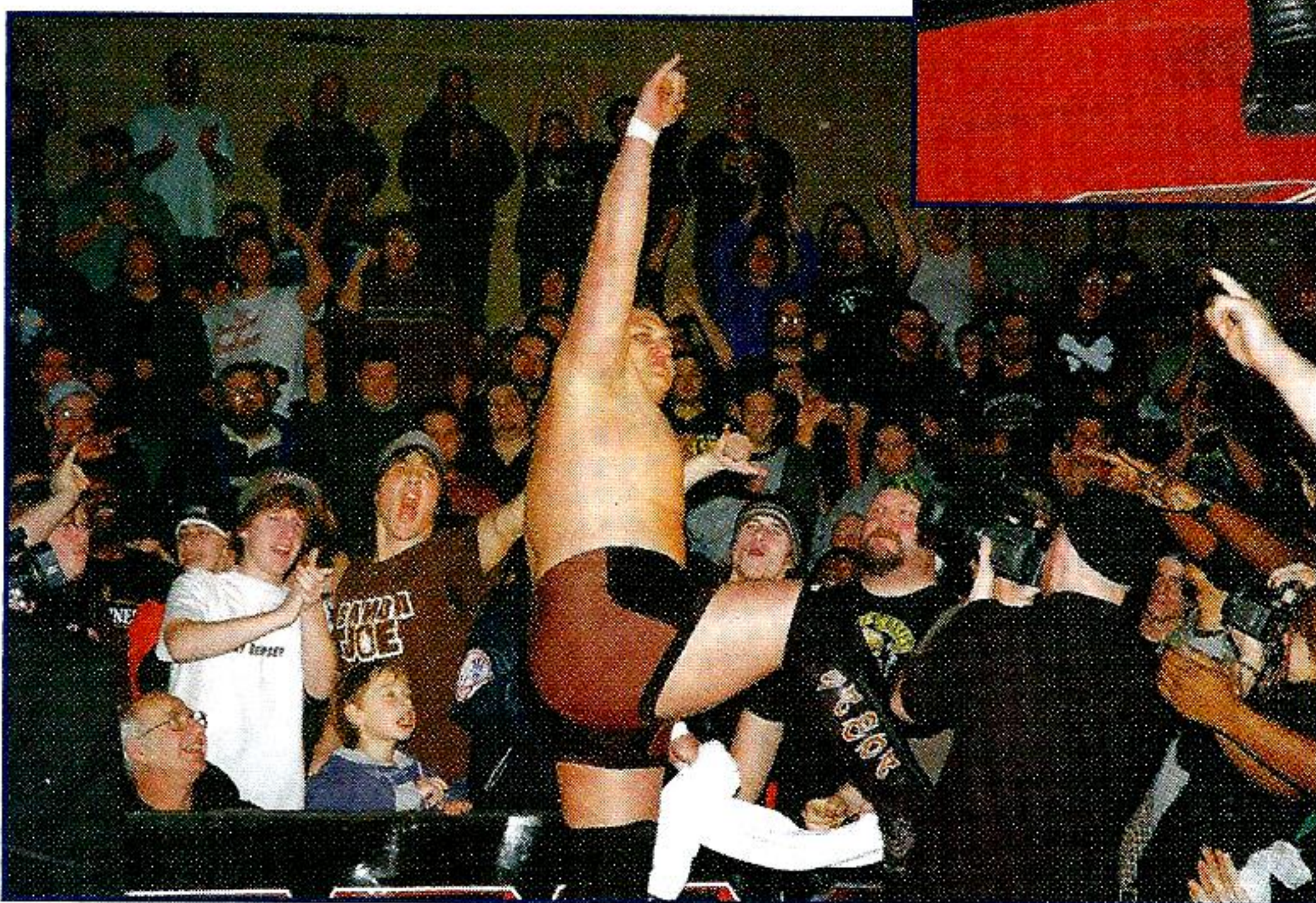


Photo by Joe Zanolle

Joe made a gut-wrenching decision to leave his beloved Ring of Honor to focus on his career in Orlando and on attaining the NWA World title. Before he left for good, though, he embarked on a farewell tour, which included a victory over Jimmy Rave in Philadelphia (above). Joe's ROH fans are sorry to see him go, but they are proud of their hero's success (left).

championship—they expect a long, successful title reign in the near future. How much added pressure does that put on you?

JOE: I wasn't feeling any pressure until you said that. Thanks a lot, man. [Winks]. No one has higher expectations for me than myself. I've got the confidence to believe that when I set my mind to something, I accomplish it.

KREWDA: Was it a hard decision to concentrate full-time on TNA and cut your ties with Ring of Honor, or did you feel it was simply time to move on?

JOE: ROH will always be special to me, but it was a business and practical decision. I put a lot of thought into it, but once I made up my mind, the path I needed to take was clear to me. The reaction of the ROH fans and the locker room during my farewell tour was something I'll always remember. But, right now, my focus needs to be on the NWA title.

JOE: This is my livelihood and I feel like I own that ring out there. When there's another man out there who wants to bust you up, take away the things you've worked to achieve, make the ring his instead of yours, it's pretty easy to get in the frame of mind to destroy anyone in your way.

ALVEN: After you finally lost a couple of matches in TNA—cleanly, in the case of tapping out against Kurt Angle, controversially in the case of Christian Cage, who used the ropes for a pinfall—do you feel it has taken away at

all from the aura of invincibility you built up?

JOE: No. I think we've gotten to the point where fans know what I can do, and no one wins all of the time. People know that I can defeat a guy of Angle's caliber on any given night, just as he can win over me on a particular night.

MELTZER: Expectations for you these days are very high. A lot of people consider you the favorite to eventually beat Christian Cage for the NWA World title. Some people even say it's not enough just for you to win the

MELTZER: You look, behave, and wrestle more like a heel than a fan favorite, yet every time you show up, fans chant "Joe's gonna kill you" at your opponents. And, of course, *PWI* readers voted you 2006's most popular wrestler and you were chosen TNA's 2006 MVP. How would describe your relationship with the fans?

JOE: I never try to go out and get cheers or boos. I'm pretty consistent in my approach. I think people recognize that I give everything I have to give in the ring and that I enjoy

putting a hurting on people as much as the fans enjoy watching me do it. It's not all that different from Angle or, if you go back, The Road Warriors. Most of my opponents are heels, but sometimes they're faces, but my approach doesn't really change.

ALVEN: There is always talk about WWE trying to lure you away from TNA.

JOE: Really? I've never heard that one before [grins].

ALVEN: Seriously, though. What crosses your mind when you look at the way WWE portrays Umaga—as an old-school island savage—and gives him a nickname similar to yours?

JOE: [Grins] I wonder who does his hair and whether he'd like me to e-mail him the number of a good dentist. Look, I respect Eddie Fatu, the guy who wrestles as Umaga. He comes from the Anoa-Fatu family of wrestlers. I've met many of them, and they're all great guys who are legitimately tough. Umaga has found a role, and he's had a really good run. If an indirect comparison is made between him and me, that's fine. It doesn't bother me.

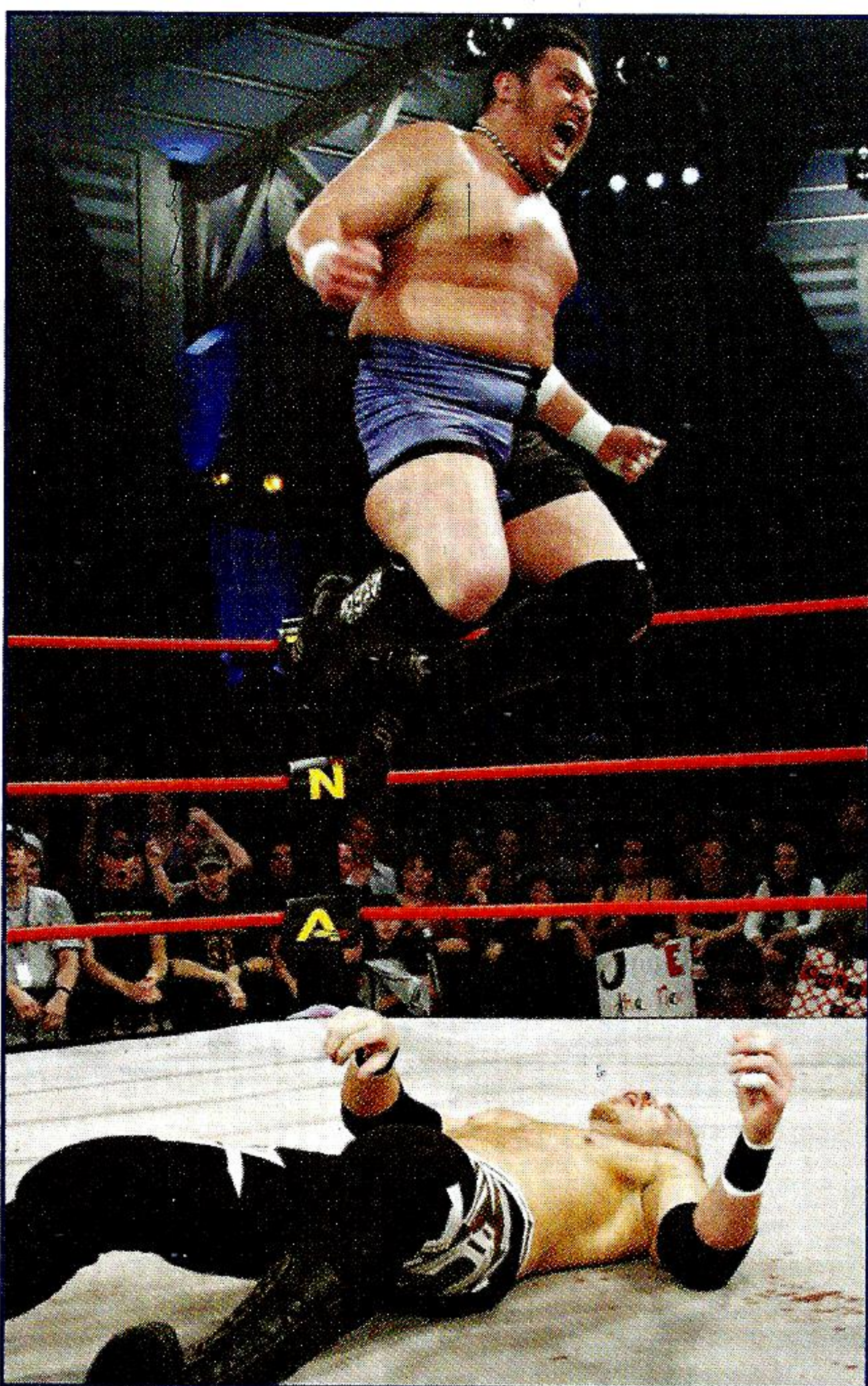
KREWDA: What Al is getting at is whether you would ever consider a jump to WWE if it meant changing your image to fit in with their promotional style.

JOE: I've got a good thing going on here, so there's no need to even think about leaving right now. The truthful answer is that it's a non-issue. You never say never about anything in this business, but I can honestly say that my focus is solely on TNA. I get to be myself, make a good living, and have a life away from the ring, too.

MELTZER: You had a few injury scares over the

last couple years, but fortunately nothing that has put you out long term. Even so, guys who work that high-intensity style like yours tend to pile up injuries quickly. How do you deal with that?

JOE: Pain is part of this business. You learn that very early on. Part of the reason why I scaled back my indy schedule and then did a final tour with ROH is that, to work the style I need to work to be successful, I couldn't keep spreading myself so thin. I've been fortunate to get to the point in my career where I can weigh the risk against the reward—both physically and financially. I deal with injuries by trying to be smart about when I'm able to work through them and when I need to listen to my body.



The 270-pounder faces the risk of major injuries, especially when executing feats that most big men never even attempt. Fortunately, Joe has been lucky thus far, but his step away from Ring of Honor may help him avoid major injuries.

ALVEN: You've always been a wrestler who maintains your own presence on the Internet, apart from your company's website. You've always been actively involved in operating your own web page and blogging for your fans. How'd you get into that?


JOE: Simple. I've always enjoyed computers. But it used to be that I could pretty much handle the e-mails I got from people. Nowadays, I get crushed with e-mail, and I don't have as much opportunity to write online as I used to. I've found I really need to prioritize my online time, or else I'd just spend 10 hours a day answering e-mails all day from people who write to say things like, "Yo, Joe! Wassup big guy?" The other part of it is that when I have downtime, I also want to have time for my family and friends.

MELTZER: Speaking of your family, I've heard your mom is a pretty legendary cook.

JOE: Oh, yeah. She still loves to cook and the more people who come—my brothers and sisters, our friends, our other relatives—the better. You haven't lived until you've had my mom's cooking, basted in my dad's secret barbecue sauce. I look forward to when we can all get together at my family's table.

KREWDA: Ever thought of selling your family's Samoan barbecue online?

JOE: Only problem is my dad won't tell anyone his recipe, even under pain of the kokina clutch. I could try to look over his shoulder while he's making it, but he'd wheel around with catlike quickness and grab me in a choke grip that'll make me tap out faster than Kurt Angle ever could make me. Not even I would want to mess with my dad when it comes to him protecting his recipe. Winning the NWA title will be easy by comparison. □



PWT'S *State of* the **GAME** address

FOR FANS IN the U.S., wrestling is on a five-year high. Raw and Smackdown have remained steady in their creative course for the past year and—at best—seem to be wholly better products than they were a year ago. The competition is certainly there as well, given the emergence of TNA on the backs of several former WWE stars and the debut of a kinder, gentler ECW (although WWE may be wise to not even run an ECW-brand show in South Philadelphia). Wrestling Society X made a valiant effort on MTV, but has now gone by the wayside.

The seeds for competition are there—even if true competition is still a few years off.

For passionate fans of the sport, VCRs and DVRs run seemingly continuously. There are about six hours of wrestling on our TVs every week. And that doesn't count between two and three pay-per-views each month or the international scene.

American fans' interest in the international wrestling scene is at a high point. Independents Ring of Honor and CHIKARA have utilized talent

from Japan and Mexico that fans in this country may have seen only on videotape or perhaps never even heard of. The placement of Mexican star Mistico at number five in the 2006 "PWI 500" raised quite a few eyebrows, but his recent tryout with WWE in San Diego prior to Smackdown impressed company executives, and there is talk that he and Rey Mysterio Jr. could eventually be the cornerstones of a new Mexico-based WWE promotion.

There is a lot of evidence that the state of our fair game is on an upswing. Attendance is up. Ratings are up. Competition is continually growing. While it would not be fair to compare either the fan following or the quality of the wrestling product to where it was in the late-1990s, there are plenty of reasons to believe that the mainstream acceptance of wrestling is again just around the corner.

Special thanks to Senior Writer Frank Ingiosi, as well as Contributing Writers Jake Black, Brady Hicks, Mike Spillane, and Al Alven, for this comprehensive study of the current state of wrestling. It is vital reading.

State of RAW

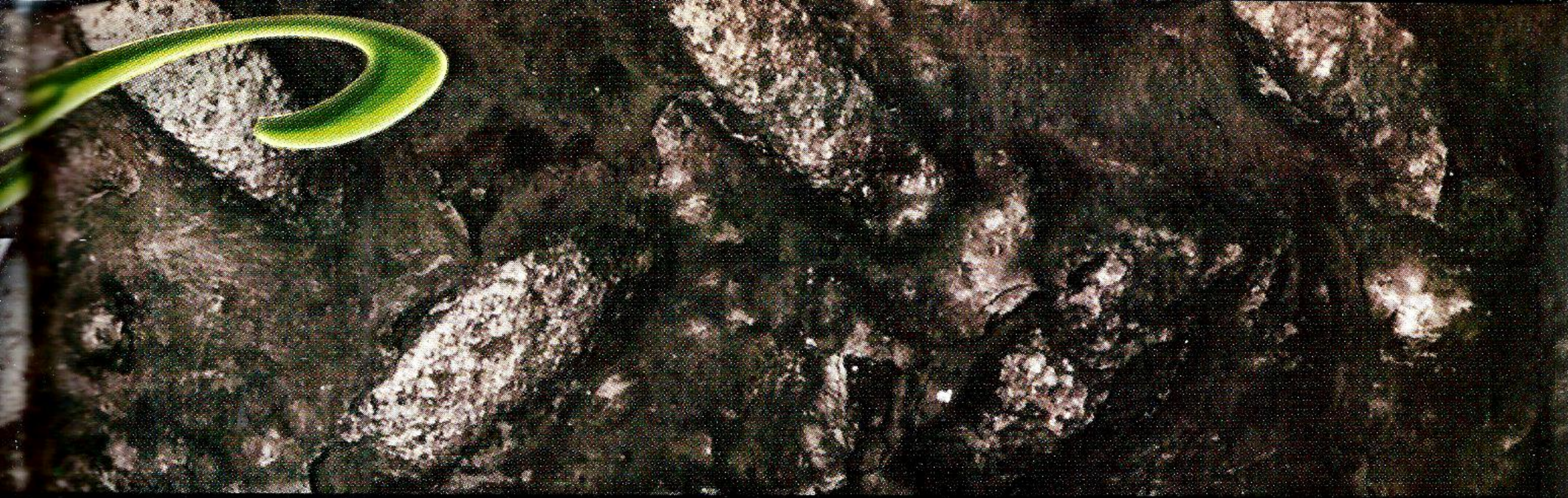
WWE's flagship brand faced an uncertain future when Triple-H, Raw's cornerstone for the past half-decade, was forced out of action due to an injury. That gave other main-eventers the opportunity to step up in his absence, including his DX pal, Shawn Michaels, and John Cena. And the brand is stronger for it

ONE OF THE great selling points of WWE's video-on-demand service, WWE 24/7, is that it features episodes of *Raw* and *Nitro* from the classic days of the "Monday Night War." Watching these episodes from a decade ago reminds us of why we are lifelong fans of the sport. Too often, Tony Schiavone would refer to a mediocre edition of *Nitro* as "the biggest night in the history of our sport." But Schiavone said something else, which stands out as we explore "The State Of Raw."

When the "Monday Night War" was at its peak, and the NWO was running wild in WCW, Tony Schiavone often said, "We hate to see an injury in this sport, but ... " and then go on to describe



Triple-H is out because the good ol' quad failed again, but it may be the best thing that could have happened to Raw. With "The King Of Kings" away, the rest of the roster has risen to the challenge of picking up the slack.



The threat of a celebrity invasion was averted thanks to Raw World champion John Cena, who tossed faux-celebrity Kevin Federline from WWE TV. Thankfully, K-Fed has not been back.

the potential benefits an injury to an NWO member would bring WCW. It's a statement that applies to Raw's current state.

When Triple-H went down with a newly torn quadriceps muscle, it sent WWE into a scramble to alter Raw's entire creative direction, especially the buildup to WrestleMania. Triple-H has long been Raw's

top performer. Like Schiavone used to say, we hate to see an injury in the sport, but Triple-H's injury has been one of the best things to happen to Raw in recent years.

Last year, we described the state of Raw as not great, but strong. This year, the Raw brand is even stronger, getting very close to great. It is, of

course, not as strong as it was 10 years ago (one of those other perks in watching the old "Monday Night War" on 24/7 is remembering how great the show really was), but the point of this examination is to judge Raw by its own merits in the present.

With Triple-H out, it derailed the DeGeneration X reunion,



In Triple-H's absence, Umaga has become the top heel, and was handpicked by Vinnie Mac himself to represent the chairman in the "Battle Of The Billionaires" match at WrestleMania against Donald Trump's man, Bobby Lashley.

but opened the door for several other Raw wrestlers to get a shot at being top performers. As we look at the top tier of Raw, it's not surprising that the faces of the brand's top performers haven't changed too much. But, for these main-eventers, their stars have risen a little higher in the WWE stratosphere.

As 2007 kicked off, Raw World champion John Cena was mired in a non-feud with Britney Spears' ex, Kevin Federline. Cena's battles with K-Fed garnered plenty of mainstream attention, and his popularity rose tremendously among male fans. Since his debut in WWE, Cena's faced an uphill battle in getting WWE's male fans to appreciate his character and in-ring ability. But by defending the honor of wrestling against a celebrity outsider, Cena was hailed a hero.

With the momentum of a newfound fan base behind him, Cena took on the challenge of Umaga, and ended the "Samoan Bulldozer's" undefeated streak. While ending the streak was an exclamation point in Cena's career, the high-profile feud might have benefited Umaga even more.

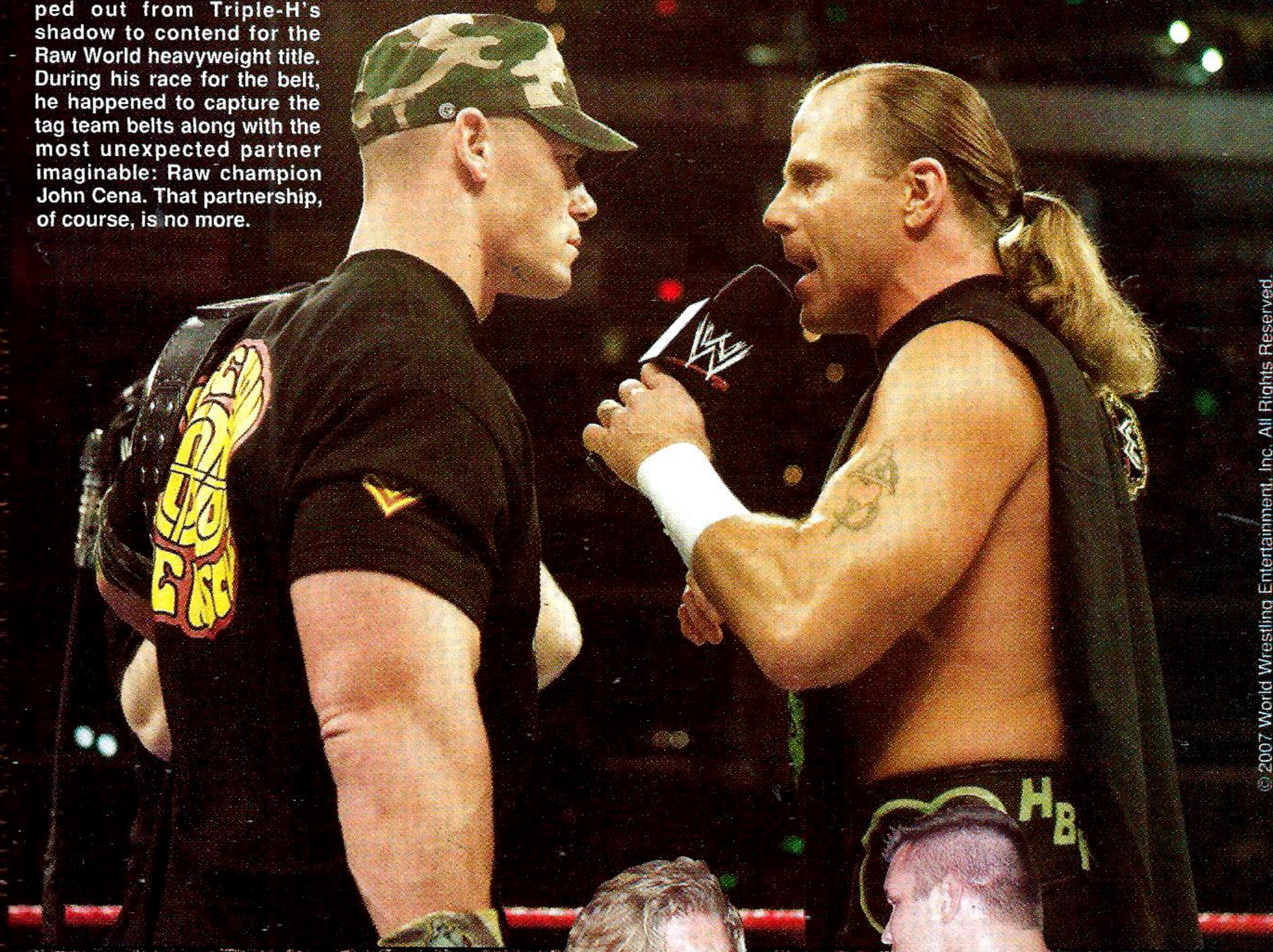
Not since Jimmy Snuka flew off the top of the cage has a Polynesian wrestler been such a force in WWE. Umaga has burst into the top tier on Raw, the only truly new face among the

brand's main-eventers. Despite the end of his undefeated streak, Umaga rebounded to become the Intercontinental champion and was one of the competitors in what many called the "real" main event of WrestleMania, the "Battle Of The Billionaires." He was Vince McMahon's hand-picked representative in the match; being chosen by the boss is a boon for any wrestler. Despite his loss to ECW champion Bobby Lashley at WrestleMania, Umaga should be a consistent heel at the top of the card for the next year.

Triple-H's absence might have helped Umaga, but the greatest beneficiary is Shawn Michaels. Michaels lost his DX partner, but that hasn't slowed down the "Heartbreak Kid." HBK had appeared to be a mere sidekick in DX prior to Triple-H's injury, but now Michaels has upped his game. He delivered an incredible performance at the Royal Rumble (outlasted only by The Undertaker) and won the Raw World tag team championship with John Cena. This unique tag team pairing was the top story on Raw leading up to WrestleMania, due to the fact that Cena and Michaels were set to face each other at WWE's biggest event of the year.

Michaels has been a tremendous fan favorite over the past few months. His re-formation of DX

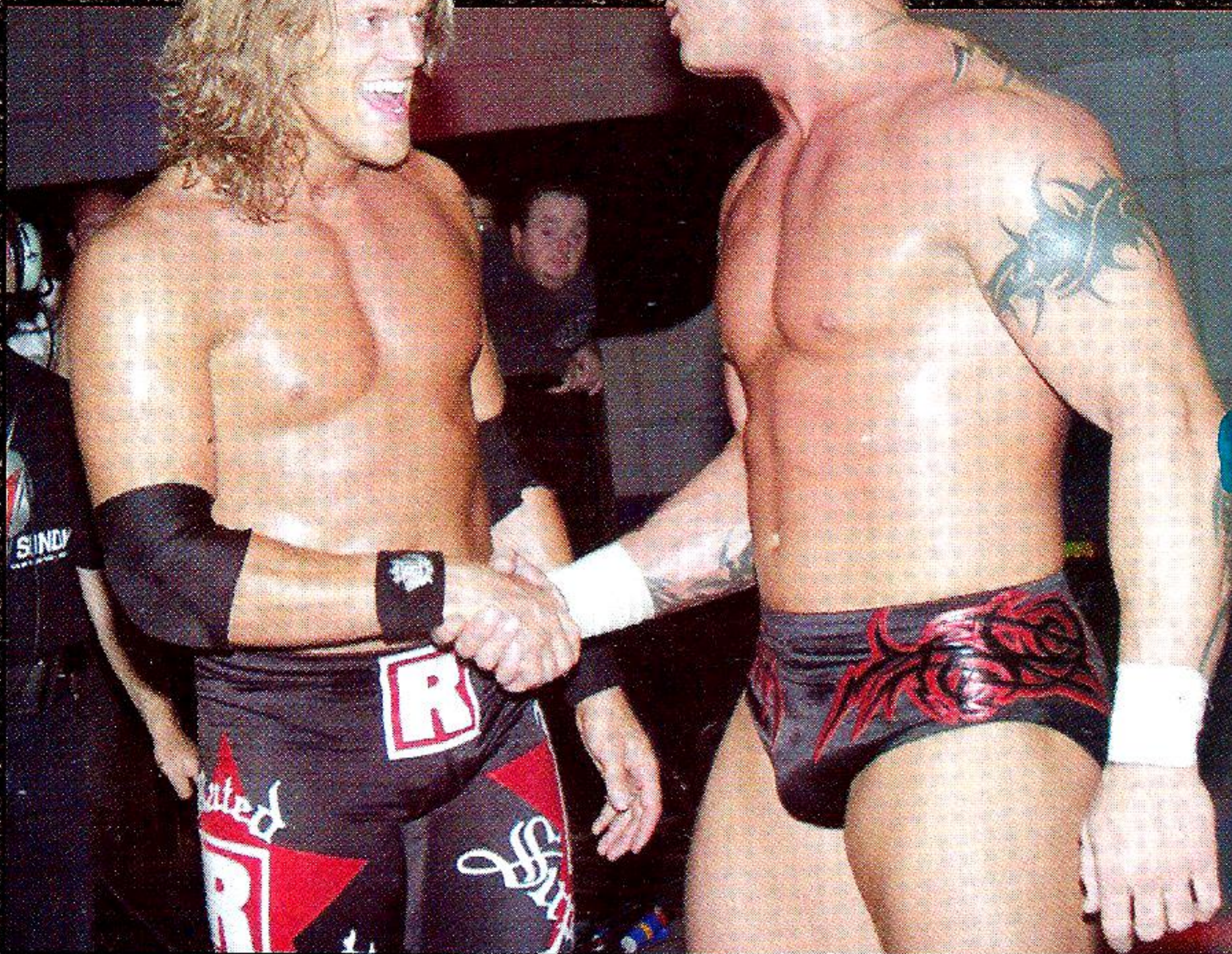
When the DX train ran off-track, Shawn Michaels stepped out from Triple-H's shadow to contend for the Raw World heavyweight title. During his race for the belt, he happened to capture the tag team belts along with the most unexpected partner imaginable: Raw champion John Cena. That partnership, of course, is no more.



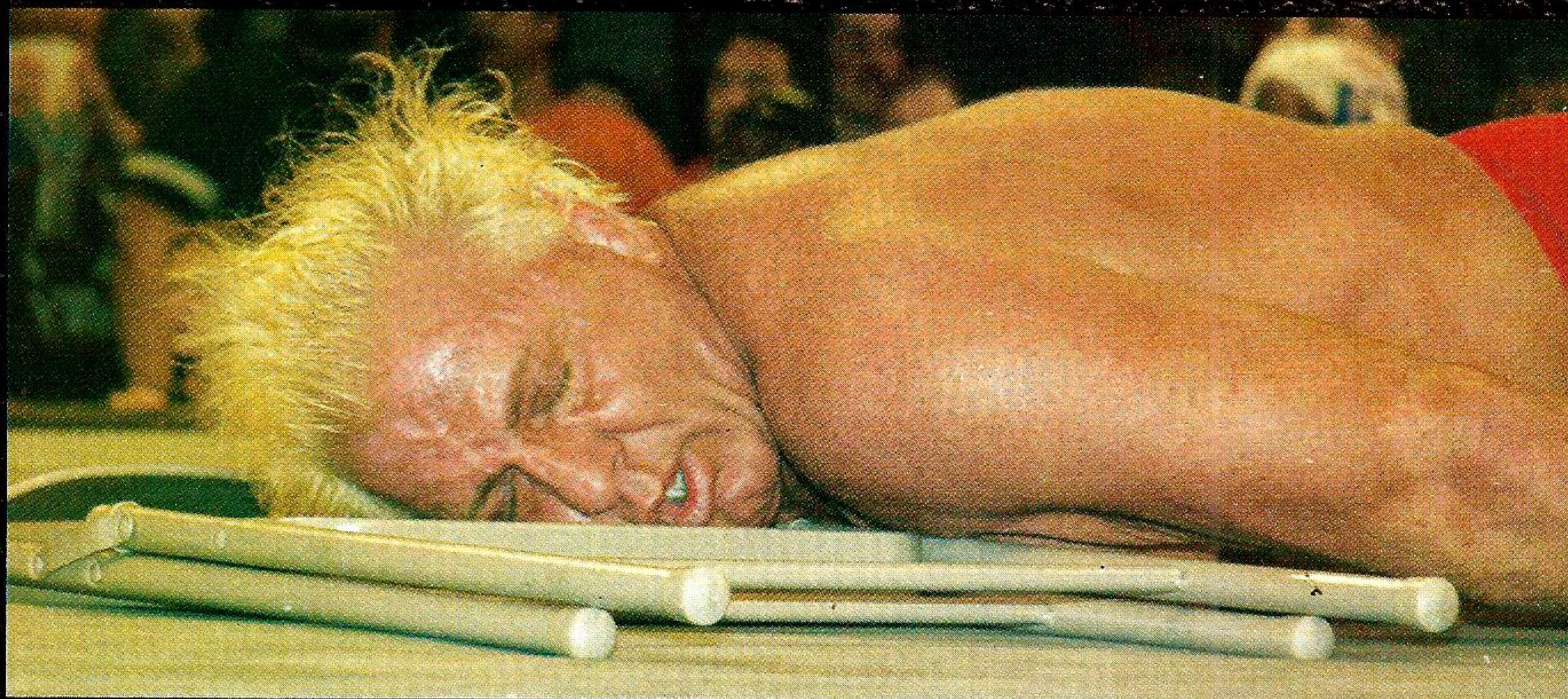
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and strong performances in several matches has reminded fans of why Michaels used to call himself "the icon who can still go." He is arguably the best wrestler and most consistent performer on the whole Raw roster. His 22 years of experience in the ring have prepared him for this point in his career. He is the flagbearer for Raw, and part of what has made the brand so strong. When the top guy on the brand is as strong, talented, and consistent as Michaels, the whole brand is stronger.

Another strong link in Raw's top tier is Edge. When Lita left WWE in late-2006, it was thought that Edge's career would take a downturn. In actuality, it may have reinvigorated him. He was last year's great breakout star on



Edge is unarguably one of the top heels and performers currently in WWE, but tag team partner Randy Orton has come up short in comparison. Teaming with Edge keeps Orton in the main-event picture, but without the "Rated R Superstar," Orton runs the risk of sinking to mid-card level.



Ric Flair is helping the next great stars of tomorrow build their careers. Losing to Kenny Dykstra and Carlito may appear to stain his legacy, but Flair's contributions are valuable to the red brand.

the Raw brand. He was such a great heel that he became ultra-cool to many. With Triple-H's sudden popularity in 2006, Edge became the undisputed top heel on Raw. Few would disagree that the blond, brash Canadian is a talented in-ring performer. But more than that, Edge is smart. His smarts have given him an advantage over so many rivals on the Raw roster that no one is safe, not even Randy Orton, Edge's tag team partner. It's often said that a hero is only as good as his villain. Well, there are few villains as great as Edge. As a result, everyone on Raw looks better.

The weakest link in Raw's top tier might well be Edge's tag team partner, Randy Orton. Orton rose to the top of the game as the youngest world champion in WWE history, but it was perhaps a case of too much too soon. Orton hasn't seemed to recapture the glory he had as a member of Evolution years ago. Plus, personal issues and suspensions have hurt his credibility. This talented youngster doesn't add much to the main-event picture when compared to Edge, Cena, Michaels, and even Umaga.

Orton always has good matches with other top-tier stars, yet there is little evidence that he can sell tickets on his own. Considering his tensions with Edge and his desire for the Raw World championship, he is perhaps the biggest question mark on Raw. As of now, Orton represents the bridge between mid-card wrestlers and the top performers.

With stars such as Rob Van Dam now in FCW and the arrival of The Great Khali, Raw's mid-card has changed dramatically over the past year. Ric Flair continues to be the biggest asset to the mid-card ranks. He's the man in the middle of the show right now. Whether it's been his matches against Kenny Dykstra, or helping Carlito up his game, the 16-time world champion has groomed the next generation of wrestlers. While many believe this is a disgrace because it appears that Flair is tainting his legacy by losing to mid-carders, this has been an asset to both Raw and the industry as a whole. Flair's passion and knowledge is irreplaceable. He is the foundation of the business, and Raw is only as strong

as its foundation.

While Flair may be the biggest asset to the mid-card level, Khali is the biggest physical specimen not only on Raw, but also in the company. Like Orton, Khali doesn't have a great reputation among fans, but that has never stopped Vince McMahon before. Khali has the look the boss loves, and therefore he is an important part of WWE's favorite weekly show. Flair may provide a strong foundation to the mid-card tier, but there are a few cracks in that foundation. One of those cracks is Khali. He's not very talented and doesn't really add a lot beyond his size.

There are others, however, in the mid-card ranks who do add a lot to Raw. Wrestlers such as Carlito, Chris Masters, and Kenny Dykstra come out week after week, deliver good matches, and inject excitement into the show. They are, like Michaels and Cena, consistent, strong performers.

Jeff Hardy and Johnny Nitro are two more powerful performers on the Raw mid-card. Both men made their names in tag teams, which they have reformed occasionally in recent



He has the look; he's got intimidation; he's even got Vince's love. It's just a shame he hasn't got the skills. If he's ever going to earn the fans' respect, The Great Khali will have to improve as a performer.



With the retirements of Trish Stratus and Lita, the next generation of the Hart family may be the last existing hope for the women's division. Nattie Neidhart's signing may go a long way toward jumpstarting competition among WWE's Divas.

months, but both are workhorses in the ring. Hardy was the most dominant Intercontinental champion of the past year and rose above his inconsistent track record. Nitro has proven that he has the intensity and ability to take his game to the next level and is poised to become a main-eventer someday.

With the main event and mid-card levels so strong, what stops Raw from being nearly perfect? The answer is simple: the women's division. Last year, *PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED* called the women's division a solid contribution to Raw's quality. We sang the praises of Trish Stratus and the rest of Raw's women.

What a difference a year makes.

WWE's women's division has changed more than any other aspect of Raw. Trish Stratus and Lita are gone. Beth Phoenix hasn't appeared in a year, while stalwarts Mickie James and Victoria aren't given the time to have the solid matches they are capable of delivering. Women's champion Melina works hard and has improved, but the division has become overshadowed by non-wrestling Divas such as Maria Kanellis, Torrie Wilson, and Ashley Massaro. Yes, they have matches, but as Jim Ross often says, they aren't Lou Thesz classics.

Consistent ring work made the women's division a strong part of the Raw brand last year. Yes, the non-wrestling women are easy on the eyes, but they have taken over and hurt the credibility of the whole division. However, there is reason to be optimistic about the women's division. Phoenix will be back, and WWE has signed third-generation Hart family member Nattie Neidhart. These two women could add a great deal to the division if given the chance.

As WWE's flagship show, Raw features Vince McMahon's favorite talent, and it gets the highest ratings every week. While many fans long for Raw's glory days from the "Attitude" era of 10 years ago, the current product remains strong.

Raw is the best brand WWE's got right now, and it's become so without Triple-H. When "The Game" returns from his injury, he will return to a strong brand that grew in his absence—and can only get better with his presence. □

State of SMACK

Emerging from the doldrums of the UPN-CW changeover, Smackdown's ratings have rebounded and the brand is now receiving critical acclaim from fans and journalists alike. Should The Undertaker receive the credit? Batista? Actually, the entire roster deserves kudos

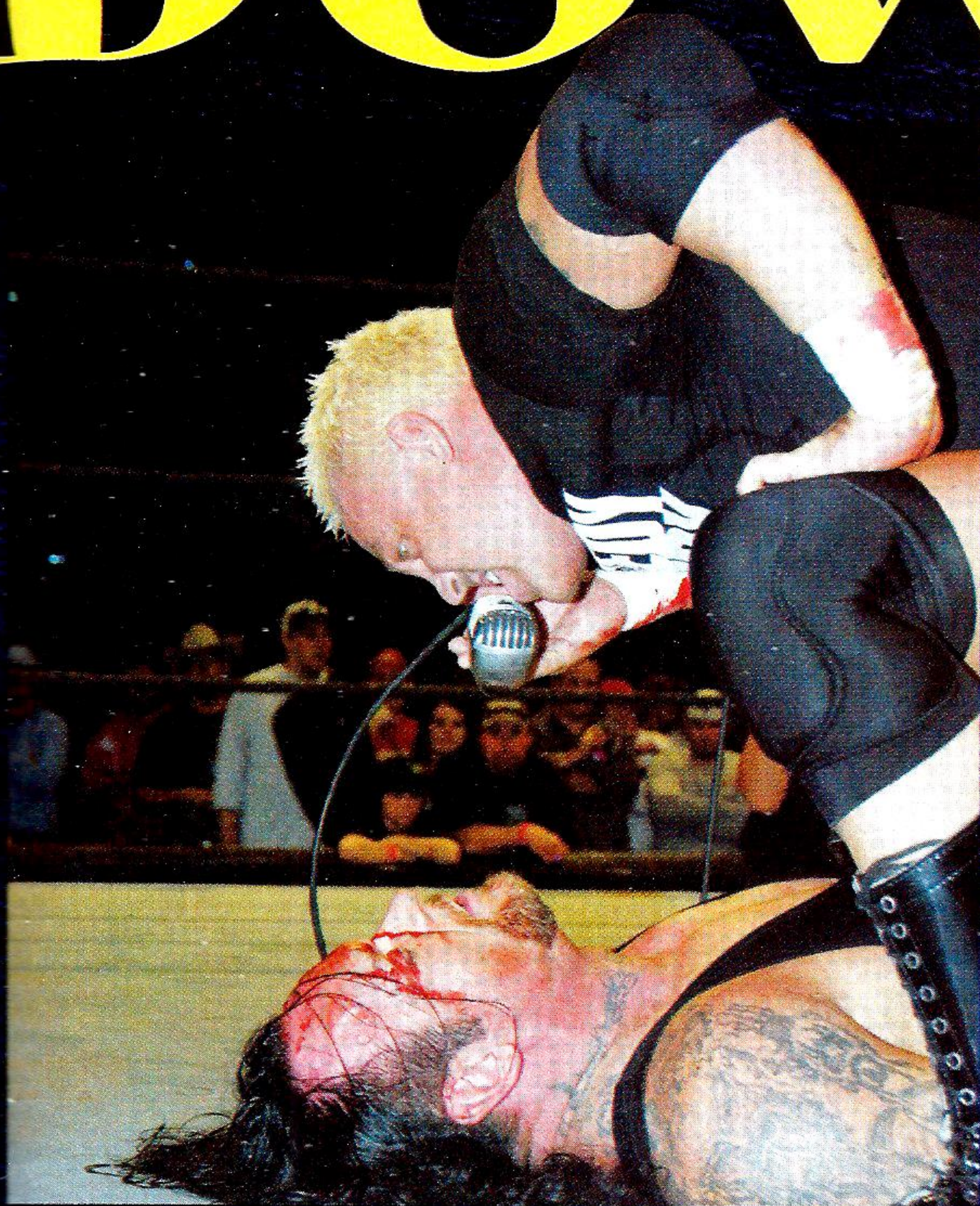
FOR THE PAST year, Smackdown has been viewed by WWE management as the "middle child," left in Raw's shadow, but not needing a high level of attention like ECW. In spite of this, the Smackdown brand has turned itself into WWE's "Little Engine That Could." It has quietly, determinedly chugged up the mountain in the face of disbelievers (including some inside WWE) with an attitude of "I think I can." As a result, Smackdown has become WWE's best wrestling brand, with some of the hardest-working, most talented in-ring performers in the business.

Smackdown doesn't have the burden of being the flagship brand, as Raw does, or have the stigma of



Sure, Smackdown has its share of WWE-style storylines, such as the much-maligned Guerrero family-Rey Mysterio Jr. feud, but the saving grace of Smackdown is that in-ring action drives the brand instead of an overabundance of farfetched Creative schemes, unlike its big brother on Monday nights.

DOWN



Smackdown World champion The Undertaker could have a star mentality and agree only to wrestle guaranteed wins. But Taker is using his name recognition to advance the up-and-coming names on Smackdown, such as Ken Kennedy. And, sometimes, "The Dead Man" even loses.

being the re-born ECW. It is what it is: solid wrestling action week after week with a tremendously positive mix of talent. Yes, some storylines—such as those involving Vickie Guerrero—have earned the disdain of fans, but for the most part, it is the actual wrestling that makes this brand strong. In fact, in terms of actual wrestling, it is the strongest of the three WWE brands.

The blue brand has recovered nicely since fall 2006 when UPN merged with the WB to form the CW, making Smackdown unavailable in some markets during the switch. Since that time, Smackdown has rebounded to ratings nearing the 3.0-mark.

Smackdown's diversity of talent has been the key to its success. Unlike Raw, there is an even mix of top-tier talent and up-and-coming stars. They all wrestle each other, making the lower-tier talent stronger while maintaining the credibility of the top-tier performers.

The top tier, much like the brand's entire roster, is a strong mix of legends and new talent at the peak of their game. In our



Batista is the fan draw. He may lack a varied move set, but his title history, size, power, and charisma elicit a reaction from the crowd that makes viewers tune in to the CW each Friday. It will be interesting to see what direction his post-WrestleMania career takes.

opinion, the top guy on Smackdown—with or without the World title—is The Undertaker. Taker symbolizes what makes the brand strong. His nearly two decades of dominance in WWE, his undefeated streak at WrestleMania, and his multiple reigns as a world champion have given him legendary status. His Smackdown World title victory over Batista at WrestleMania 23 is just one more line on an extraordinary resume. Add to that his intriguing character, and there will never be another Undertaker.

Some stars—if they reached his status as a legend—would refuse to work with younger talent and never give up their main-event spots. But The Undertaker leads Smackdown by example. His feuds with wrestlers such as The Great Khali and Ken Kennedy made his opponents bigger stars than they would have been otherwise. Undertaker made these younger men shine, simply by allowing them to go against him. And did these mid-card feuds diminish the “Dead Man’s” legacy? No. He worked with up-and-comers and still won the Royal Rumble and won at WrestleMania. He has helped pull Smackdown up to his level. He could have done this single-handedly,

but it wasn’t necessary. Others have contributed to Smackdown’s improved quality.

Another wrestler in the top tier who must receive credit is former champ Batista. The former member of Evolution elicits a strong crowd reaction every time he heads to the ring. He doesn’t have the greatest variety of moves, but neither did The Rock or Hulk Hogan. Batista has a history of world championships and a charisma that makes him popular among Smackdown’s loyal fans. He’s main-evented WrestleMania, and, like The Undertaker, still worked with up-and-comers on the Smackdown roster. And while wrestlers such as Finlay aren’t rookies, they are mid-card talents whose careers have received a boost by working with Batista.

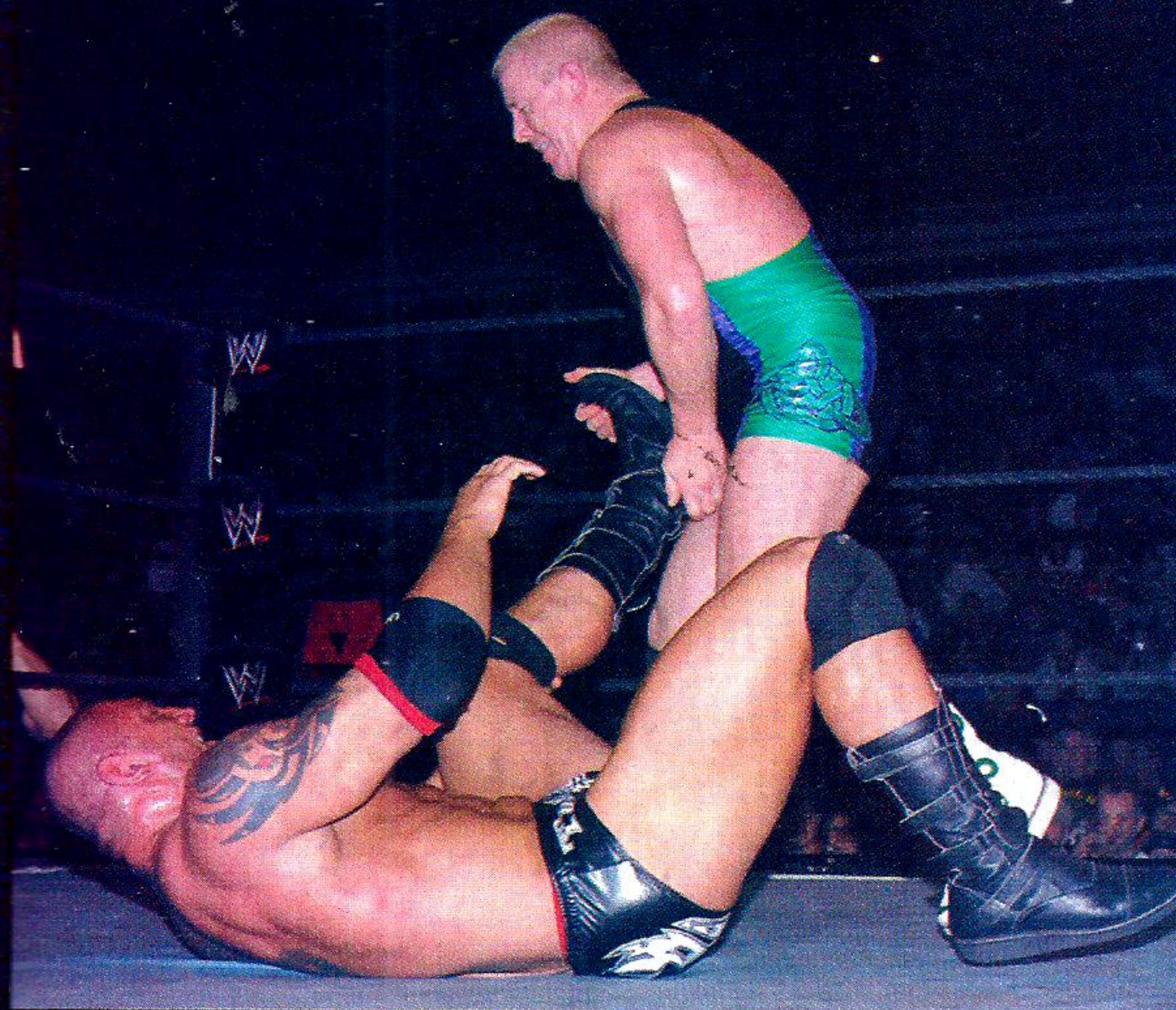
The lines between tiers are more blurred on Smackdown than on Raw or in ECW. Finlay is a perfect example of that. Despite his cartoonish sidekick, Hornswoggle, Finlay is taken seriously as a main-eventer when given the opportunity. Few viewers would be surprised to tune in on any given Friday night and see Finlay in the main event. But he’s not a former world champion, like Batista or Undertaker. He is simply a hard-working wrestler who has helped carry his load for the brand.

Like Finlay, King Booker is a bona fide main-eventer on Smackdown, although he probably would be relegated to mid-card status on Raw. Booker has held many world championships, and yet he is happy to work with the mid- and under-card talent while still in the main event. He has enough charisma, talent, and credibility that fans pay attention to him whenever he’s in the ring. He’s someone who is familiar and fun to jeer, but in their hearts, Smackdown fans appreciate him.

Even Kane has reached a higher level since moving to Smackdown from Raw. He’s been a movie star, but it’s his role on Smackdown that is most important in his career. Like The Undertaker, who has set the bar high for the rest of the brand, he works with newer talent such as Montel Vontavious Porter to make them bigger stars than they were before. Kane was always a mid-card wrestler on Raw, but (are you noticing a pattern here?) he is a main-eventer on Smackdown who can also wrestle on the mid-card and not lose any of his luster.

There are numerous others on Smackdown who could be considered main-event and mid-card wrestlers. Chris Benoit, Ken Kennedy, and Matt Hardy can be considered main-eventers one week and mid-carders the next. Yet, regardless of their placement on a particular show, they work hard in the ring and put on great matches.

All is not perfect on Smackdown, however. While the top-tier and mid-card wrestlers are sometimes indistinguishable from one another, there are three other areas in which Smackdown is not as diverse



Smackdown lacks definitive lines that distinguish the mid-carders from the top stars, enabling men like Finlay to wrestle a variety of talent without being restricted to lower level competition. He's been able to showcase his considerable talents in matches with the much-larger Batista.

and the differences are visibly clear.

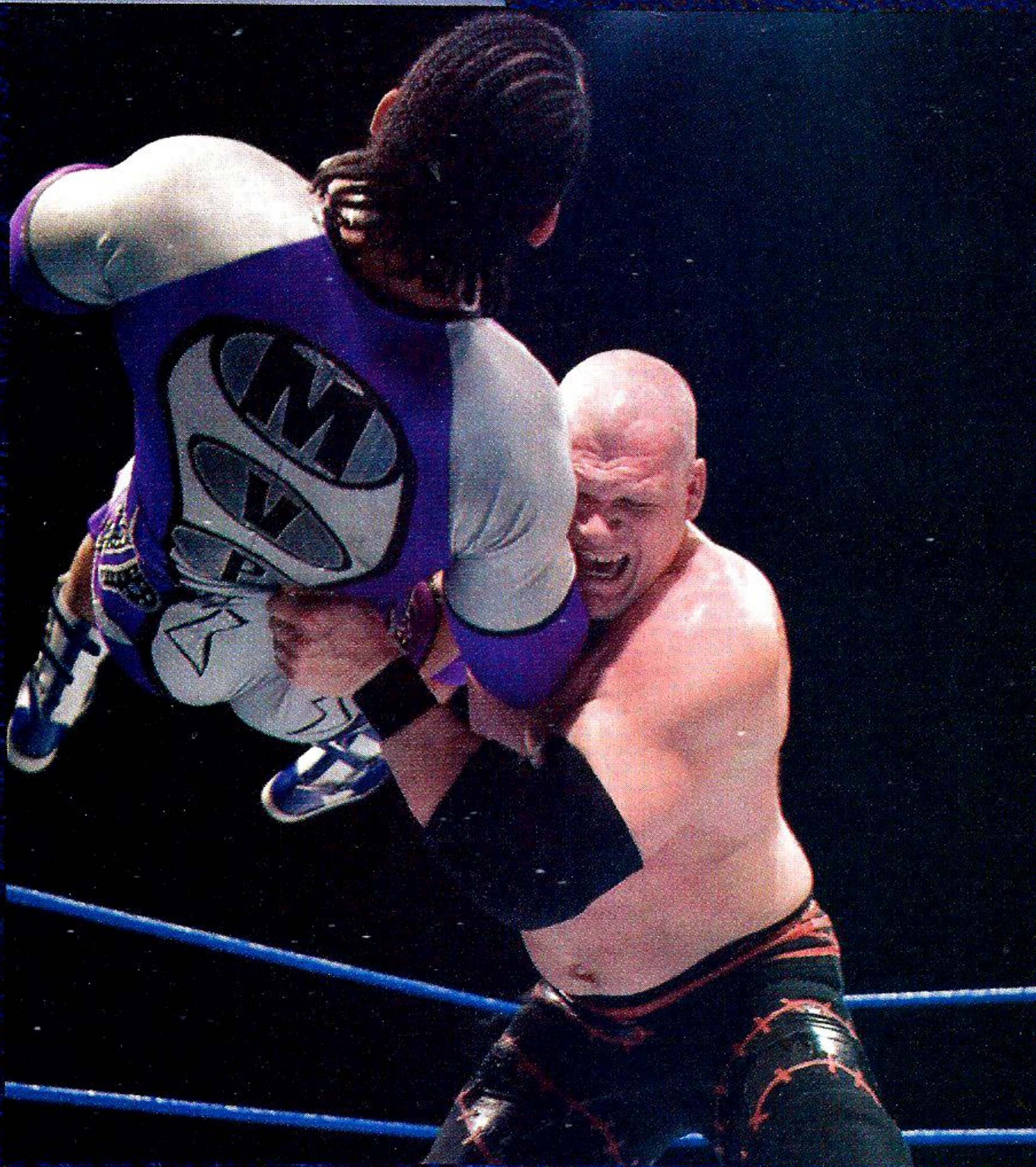
The first is in the tag team ranks. Smackdown World tag team champions Paul London and Brian Kendrick are fantastic wrestlers. They put on a series of memorable matches against M-N-M and won the belts on May 21, 2006. Nearly one year later, there are no real threats for their championship. This is not unique to Smackdown, but it is more reflective of WWE's attitude toward tag teams in general. Long gone are the days of The Hart Foundation, The Road Warriors, and even The Dudley Boyz in WWE. Sure, they have occasionally faced The Hardys and M-N-M in three-way matches, but the fact that Jeff Hardy and Johnny Nitro are Raw wrestlers—and that WWE recently released Joey Mercury—makes future such matchups impossible.

Bluntly put, there is no legitimate tag team division on Smackdown.

Raw often puts top-tier singles talent together for championship teams, and that at least gives the Raw World tag team title some credibility. This is rarely done on Smackdown, and, as a result, the Smackdown World tag team championship doesn't mean much.

The cruiserweight division is suffering, too. Smackdown fans—and seemingly WWE—forget the cruiserweight championship even exists. Gregory Helms held it for a year, losing nearly as many non-title matches as he won title matches. While Helms, new champion Chavo Guerrero Jr., London, Kendrick, and even Shannon Moore are capable of excellent cruiserweight matches, they are rarely used.

Perhaps the company's feeling is that the concept of a cruiser-



Kane was a mid-carder on Raw, but has advanced in the rankings since his jump to Smackdown. His enhanced status now enables him to follow in The Undertaker's footsteps and give new talent, like MVP, the push they vehemently crave.



The cruiserweight division is a vital element of the Smackdown brand. Even though not much importance is given to the title (Gregory Helms, pictured, racked up many non-title losses during his year as champion), these men start the show and rev up the crowd.

On Raw, top singles talent teams up to compete for the tag team title, but Smackdown leaves its top wrestlers free to compete for the singles title. Perhaps following the lead of the red brand could revitalize the blue brand's tag team title race and give London and Kendrick some real competition.

weight championship is outdated. But the cruiserweights are still important. They hook the crowd into the show. If the audience doesn't care at the start of the show, then the rest of the roster has a more difficult time. Not even The Undertaker can revive a dead crowd. The cruiserweights on Smackdown understand this, and they work just as hard as their counterparts at the top of the card. It is the cruiserweight championship and its perceived unimportance that makes the undercard seem to be a weakness of the otherwise solid brand. If Smackdown were to shed the



Since the women's title resides on Raw, the women of Smackdown are left to serve as valets and eye-candy. But women like Jillian Hall are eager to prove they can hold their own in a ring while also being ogle-worthy.

cruiserweight championship and just let the under-card talents wrestle for the sake of wrestling and entertaining the fans, the lower division talent would be stronger and make a larger contribution in the eyes of the fans.

Another weakness of Smackdown is the way it uses Divas. Raw has the women's championship, and, as a result, the most skilled women wrestlers are on the red brand. Smackdown has no shortage of women, but the women on the blue brand fill more traditional roles as managers and valets. They do not have much, if any, wrestling acumen. When Ashley Massaro, Smackdown's most popular Diva, wrestled for the women's championship on Raw, her lack of technical ability was apparent. She's a crossover

star who graced the cover of *Playboy*, but did little to enhance the credibility of the Smackdown women's division.

Fortunately, fans generally enjoy the Divas as managers and valets. If Divas are beautiful and work hard in the ring, like the recently departed Trish Stratus, then fans will embrace them. With more in-ring training, the women of Smackdown could rise to Stratus-pheric levels of excellence and acceptance. This is the approach that Jillian Hall seems to be taking. She is a sexy woman who has shown growth in her skills inside the ring. Jillian definitely is a bright spot among the Smackdown Divas.

Thanks to its partnership with the CW, Smackdown stars have been able to cross over into other

ventures. For example, Kane, Batista, and Massaro all made appearances on *Smallville*. It could be argued that WWE wrestlers get more mainstream exposure on the CW than they do in WWE film releases.

WWE may consider Smackdown a secondary league, but there are many reasons why diehard fans would think the blue brand is superior. It was very telling that WWE executives opted to eliminate ECW-branded house shows and add ECW wrestlers to Smackdown events. If ECW tanks this year, it's easy to imagine a scenario in which Smackdown absorbs most of its stars. Smackdown truly is the "little brand that could"—and should keep on chugging in the right direction for the rest of 2007. □

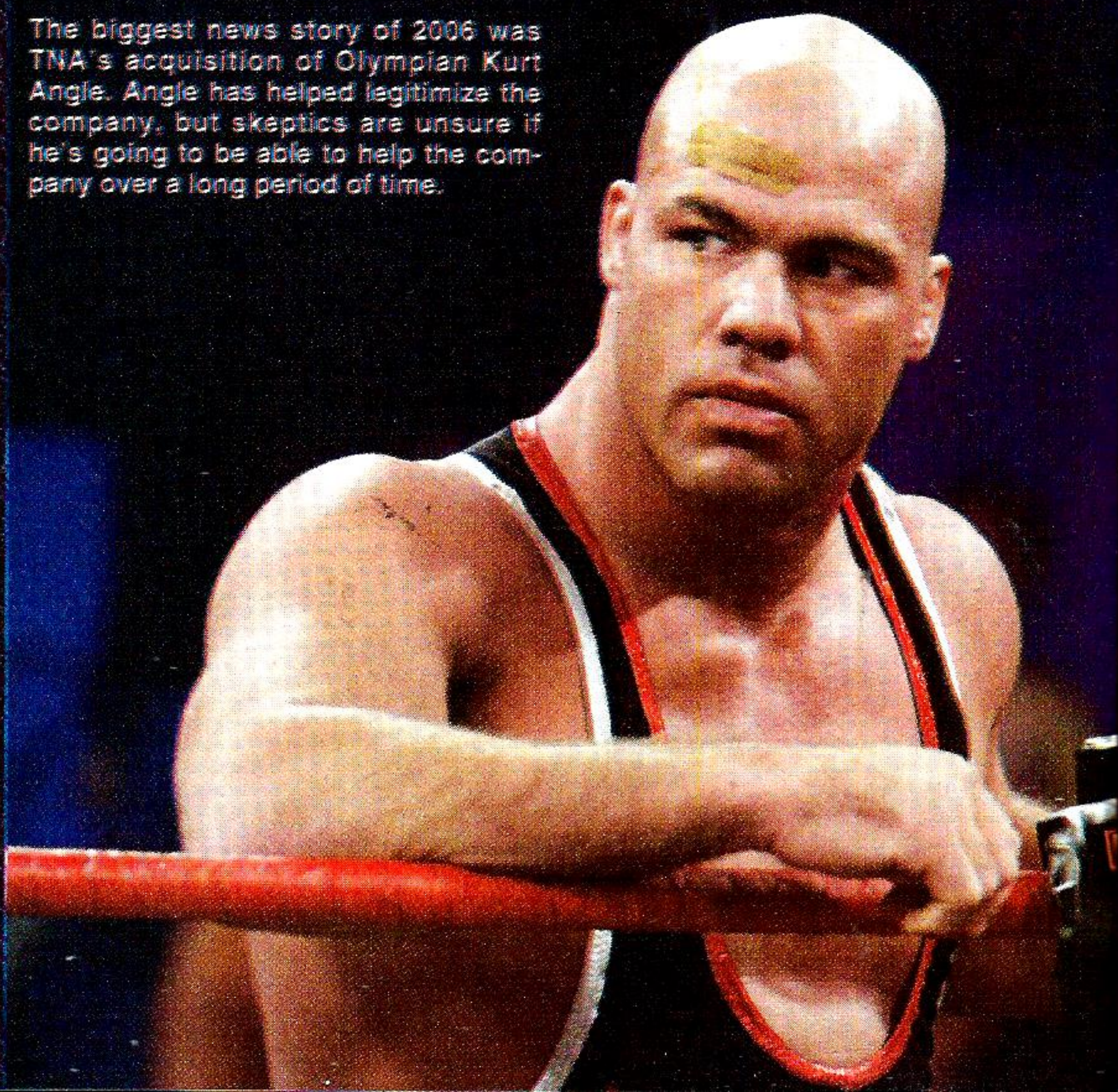
State of TNA

Approaching its fifth anniversary, TNA has defied the odds simply by staying in business. Thanks to a new time slot for *Impact* and the acquisition of Kurt Angle, TNA is finally in a position to become a profitable business, which is something most people not named McMahon think is vital for this industry

Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

THERE ARE PLENTY of reasons for optimism in the TNA locker room these days. The signing of former WWE star and multiple-time world champion Kurt Angle was the perfect acquisition to take TNA's expansion to the next level and into direct competition with WWE. Then there is Sting, a legend who recently opted to renew his initial one-year deal with the company. Sting has stated in numerous interviews that he is interested in remaining with TNA for the long haul, and would like to spend the rest of his career preparing TNA's up-and-comers for whatever wrestling's future may bring. And the biggest difference in 2007 is that TNA gets

The biggest news story of 2006 was TNA's acquisition of Olympian Kurt Angle. Angle has helped legitimize the company, but skeptics are unsure if he's going to be able to help the company over a long period of time.



to showcase its interesting mix of veterans and young talent on prime time each week.

TNA—for the first time in its five-year history—has come up on a business model that actually has a chance to put the company in the black. No more weekly Wednesday night pay-per-views. No more buying up syndicated regional time slots. And—most importantly—no more Internet streams as the primary method of getting the TNA name in the public's eye. Getting an earlier slot on Spike TV in 2006 was critical to TNA's expansion plans. Until the point of this announcement, TNA seemed to be running in place.

Indeed, TNA's double delight—the new time slot for *Impact* on Spike TV and the Angle signing—changed the dynamic in its budding promotional war with WWE. On the reverse side, *Impact* did not increase its Nielsen rating in any significant way by starting two hours earlier, which has to be disappointing to TNA and network officials alike.

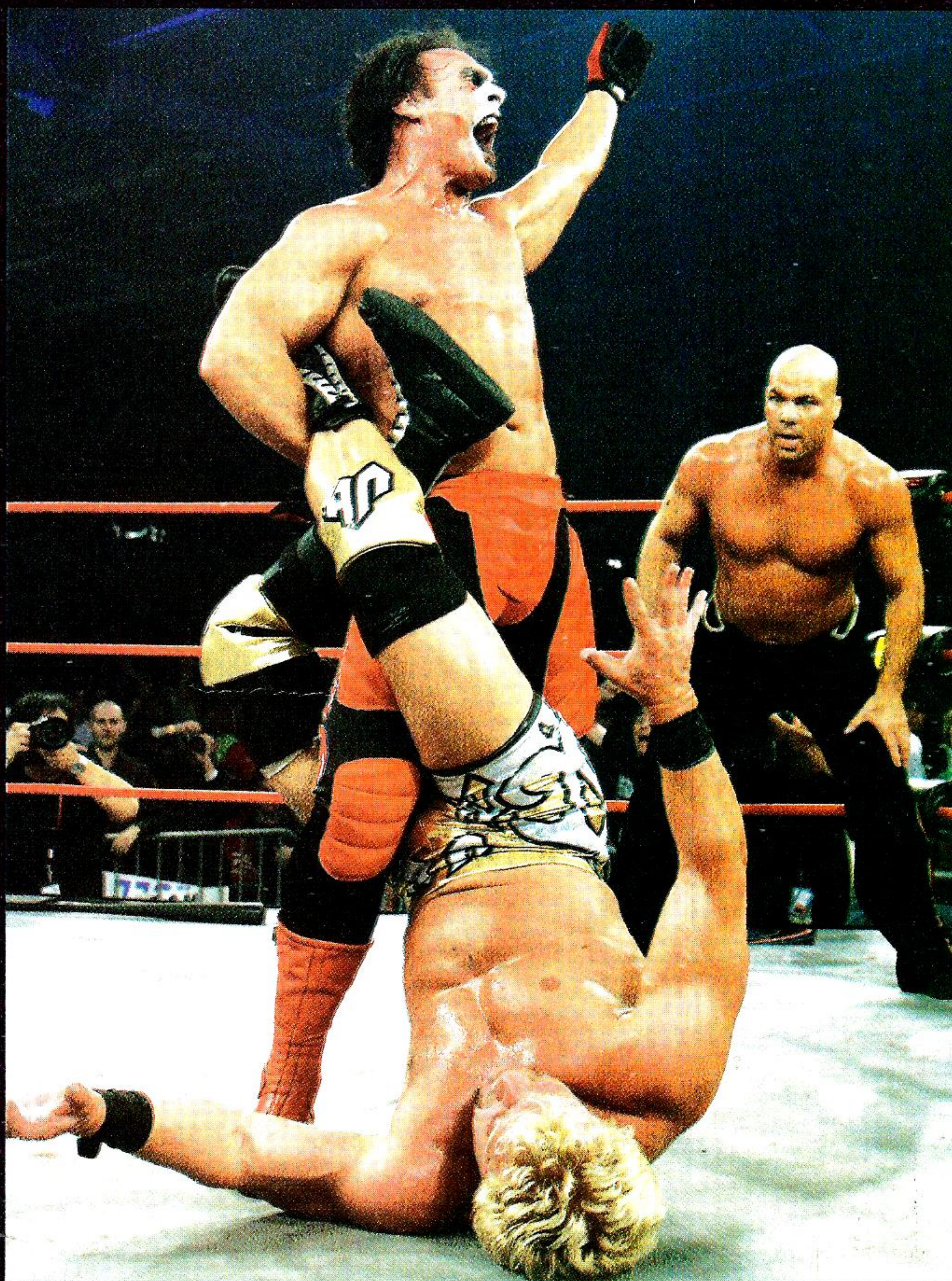
Fortunately, TNA lives within its means. TNA has cut costs and still has a relatively small roster that assembles every few weeks for pay-per-views and television tapings at Universal Studios in Orlando. TNA occasionally ventures

Many worried that Sting would rehash old WCW feuds, but Sting's star-power has benefited younger talent such as Samoa Joe, Christian Cage, A.J. Styles, and Abyss.

to other parts of the U.S. for a day or two at a time, but its talent isn't on the road 300 days a year like WWE's.

Kurt Angle's September 2006 jump to TNA, fresh off a WWE release to "collect himself and regroup," is regarded as the biggest coup in the company's history. Angle brought with him the credibility only a multiple-time world champion can offer. There is a potential downside to the signing that TNA President Dixie Carter will never acknowledge publicly. While Angle passed a battery of physical tests prior to signing with TNA, he has a very spotty medical his-





After years of dominating the NWA championship race, Jeff Jarrett finally stepped away by dropping the belt to Sting at Bound for Glory. Jarrett has concentrated his efforts on the creative and business side of the company and only recently returned to an on-air role.

tory and has admitted to heavy use of painkillers in the past. The hope is that the lighter TNA schedule will allow the Hall of Famer's body to heal and extend his career.

The comparison has been made between Angle's signing and that of Hulk Hogan by WCW in 1994. It must be remembered, however, that while Hogan came in with a great deal of fanfare, his presence did not make WCW profitable for years. The credibility factor cannot be downplayed, though. The Hogan signing signaled a change of philosophy on behalf of the company to the entire wrestling community and opened

the door for further growth.

Much like Hogan, when he immediately feuded with WCW's big name, Ric Flair, Angle was targeted by Samoa Joe, who is widely believed to be the future of the company. In fact, company officials recently requested Joe phase out his independent circuit commitments with promotions such as Ring of Honor.

Samoa Joe was the perfect choice to face Angle upon his debut, as Joe is the only star on the TNA roster who rivals Angle in talent, intensity, and popularity with the fans. Angle's submission victory over Samoa Joe showed TNA had enough faith in the former WWE star to allow him to become a serious long-term player. More importantly, Joe's subsequent rematch win put him and his fellow TNA wrestlers on par with the man who, for so long, was a dominant main-eventer in WWE.

Bolstering the talent roster with big-name talent was a priority to TNA in 2006, but equally important is know-

ing what to do with that talent once it's there. In last year's "State Of TNA," we noted that TNA needed to have Sting compete with fresh faces instead of revisiting some of his classic WCW rivalries. The prospect of Sting getting to battle Angle, Samoa Joe, Christian Cage, or A.J. Styles provides an endless series of possibilities and imaginative scenarios. Instead of the current scenario, consider how much TNA officials would be criticized if they opted to feed Sting a series of rematches from the glory days of *WCW Monday Nitro* (circa 1999-2001). What if TNA had regularly matched up Sting against men such as

Jeff Jarrett, Scott Steiner, and Kevin Nash?

Sting, who has now had championship battles against men such as Abyss and Cage, is instead doing what so many had hoped. Much like Angle, he is placing the budding stars of TNA on par with himself by facing them one on one. In this way, Sting is helping TNA forge its own legacy. It is a refreshing change to see a company using its veterans to complement and boost its developing talent.

Another welcome change in TNA has been the departure of TNA fans' whipping boy, Jeff Jarrett. For the first five years of TNA's existence, Jarrett's name had been inextricably linked to the NWA title. Even in his down-and-out times, Jarrett has always—to many fans' dismay—rebounded to win back the title. For so long, fans clamored for Jarrett to take a backseat to some of his peers.

With Jarrett's NWA World title loss to Sting at Bound for Glory 2006, his shadow is no longer looming over the championship picture. The longtime chants of "drop the belt" finally paid off.

TNA and, more specifically, Jeff Jarrett took notice and made a graceful exit. Jarrett then worked primarily backstage, approving each creative step and helping book the action away from the fans' ever-critical eyes. Just recently, Jarrett returned to action—seemingly poised as a fan favorite—but it remains to be seen whether he will try to

Christy Hemme thought her time to shine in TNA had come, but she was thrown for a loop when she was forced to wrestle a tuxedo match against "The Big Fat Oil Guy."



Kevin Nash has not been as beneficial to the future of TNA's young talent as fellow legends Sting and Angle. Nash's "Size Matters" campaign against the Chris Sabinalled X division has had a negative impact.



recapture the 10 pounds of gold.

Then again, it's possible that no one in TNA will be pursuing the NWA World title much longer. TNA may soon lose the right to use the NWA name for its singles and tag team championship belts. Since debuting on Spike, the former NWA-TNA has been gradually moving away from the longstanding NWA legacy. And many reports indicate that NWA officials have become miffed that TNA no longer consults the board when naming the belt's top contenders. In the end, it is believed that the next World champion and World tag team champions will—in fact—be forever known as “TNA champions,” ending all claims to the NWA legacy.

The only belt within the company that will be safe from re-branding is the X division title. This championship was actually a brainchild of Jerry and Jeff Jarrett, and the hope of many was that it would be treated as being equal to the heavyweight title. TNA

has de-emphasized the X division, which has drawn sharp criticism from TNA supporters who long viewed the X division as the main point of separation between this organization and WWE.

While TNA has rightfully directed much of its creative attention to its most important acquisition, Angle, the company has strayed from its initial mission while patterning itself after WWE's formula for success. It would be daring—perhaps foolhardy—to try to completely recreate what has proven to be the proper model for success in 2007. At the same time, however,



The Latin American Exchange has not only added depth to an already-strong tag team division, they have also kept their ailing mentor, Konnan, in the spotlight while he awaits a kidney transplant.

TNA runs the risk of being compared to WWE, which, given the Stamford company's unparalleled track record, probably won't work out in the five-year-old company's favor.

Would TNA fans prefer to see Kevin Nash holding court in a bathroom rather than having an actual match? Most feel that question might best be answered by the man who revitalized the WWF in the late-'90s and was (at the same time Angle was signed) hired to do something similar for TNA: Vince Russo. Knowing Russo's reputation while with the WWF and later WCW, the fans

have made him a target for everything that displeases them about TNA, but that's not entirely fair. Russo is just one member of the creative team, and Jeff Jarrett still has the most influence over booking. And if Russo is to be blamed for everything negative, he should be given credit for the improved character development among some TNA wrestlers in recent months, which is not an easy accomplishment given *Impact's* one-hour duration.

One of the more disparaging plots that has played out on *Impact* is the recent chauvinism angle between Voodoo Kin Mafia member Kip James and Christy Hemme (and this one really does have Russo's signature all over it). The former Billy Gunn has been running down women and talking about how they should—in his eyes—be used in the sport. Just when it finally appeared that Hemme would be placed in a legitimate women's division match at Against All Odds, she was thrown into a tuxedo match with "The Big Fat Oil Guy."

Apparently, the purpose of this disappointing storyline is that Hemme will bring in a series of former WWE tag teams to face VKM. So, instead of James' insults leading to a real women's division (as many had hoped), the angle was used to further popularize TNA's ever-growing tag team division.

In recent years, TNA has collected an assortment of quality teams. The division has been traditionally made up of random pairings of X division stars (such as A.J. Styles and Christopher Daniels) or former WWE castoffs (such as VKM, Team 3D, and rumored soon-to-be-TNA-stars The Bashams).

And there is a third category of TNA tag teams: homegrown pairings. Teams such as the former America's Most Wanted, The Naturals, and The Latin American Exchange have solidified TNA's tag team division as far superior to any of the three tag team rosters in WWE. In particular, LAX's violent edge and entertaining microphone work have made them TNA's most



Not everyone was thrilled with the signing of WCW alum Vince Russo, especially TNA official Jim Cornette, who made his reservations known to management. The two have gotten along far better than most expected.

intriguing team. LAX has revitalized the career of Konnan, and indy standouts Homicide and Hernandez are now taken seriously as impact players.

As a privately held company, the financial state of TNA is a matter of speculation. The company made bold strides in 2006 but, by all accounts, has not yet turned a profit. Spike TV has gone on record as being pleased with the 1.1 Nielsen rating that *Impact* averages on a weekly basis. If they truly are, we'll see *Impact* expanded to two hours before long. More important to the overall financial health of the company is converting those TV viewers to pay-per-view buyers. There has been progress, but not as much as hoped. For TNA, increasing buy rates will be its number-one priority in the coming year. □

State of ECW

Without a doubt, the new ECW has been a disappointment to the diehards who once lined up outside Viking Hall in South Philly. Now that Vince McMahon is pushing the New Breed at the expense of the ECW Originals, WWE has no choice but to move the brand beyond its hardcore roots. Will this strategy work?

EVER SINCE THE rebirth of Extreme Championship Wrestling at the first One Night Stand pay-per-view in 2005, fans have compared the new version to the classic they remember from the 1990s. It is a logical comparison, considering that the first One Night Stand was remarkably similar to the ECW of old. However, the current ECW is nothing like the original and, for the most part, fans now accept that the classic ECW is dead.

Much like Raw, the current ECW program on Sci Fi needs to be evaluated on its own merits and not compared to the glory days of a decade ago. Gone is

the passion of the once-defiant company. Missing is the underdog nature that made it popular in the past. Indeed, sports fans (and American culture) love the underdog. That is what made the bingo hall wrestlers so beloved. They weren't the typical WWE Superstars. As Joey Styles pointed out in his now famous tirade in May 2006, they were wrestlers, men who plied their craft in the ring for little to no money, simply because they loved it. They were rejects from WWE and WCW, suddenly underdogs who were fighting for respect.

It couldn't be more different in ECW today. As with the states

of Smackdown and Raw, the state of ECW will examine the various tiers of talent on the ECW brand's roster. Beginning with the top tier, it is easy to see that the original ECW is forgotten in everything but name only.

There is one man in the top tier of ECW: Bobby Lashley. It might be easy to compare him to ECW wrestlers of old by saying he was someone who couldn't get over with audiences on one of WWE's top programs, and so he went to ECW, another underdog. But that is inaccurate. Lashley is in the top spot on ECW because he is the stereotypical WWE Superstar. Big, marketable, and with a limited skill

set, Lashley is the poster child for Vince McMahon's ECW. Doubt it? He was in the "real" main event of WrestleMania 23, a spot for which no other ECW wrestler would have been considered. And represented a billionaire real estate magnate! There's nothing extreme about that. He is not a member of the revolution. He is a corporate shill doing the job he's being paid to do.

While this perspective may seem contrary to the earlier statement that the new ECW needs to stand on its own merits and not be compared to the original, in the case of Lashley, it is examining ECW on its own merits. Overall, ECW is weak, and part of the problem is that the only individual at the top of the card is a Smackdown reject who is receiving a monster push at the expense of the rest of the brand ... and Vince McMahon couldn't be happier.

There is a mentality in WWE that wrestlers who were stars in other organizations cannot be stars in WWE. If Vince didn't make them, they never existed. There are exceptions, of course, perhaps King Booker and Ric Flair, but they had to work doubly hard to achieve their current levels of esteem within the company. ECW is the very embodiment of this mentality. Lashley, the

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WWE-bred Bobby Lashley scaled the ECW roster, claiming the ECW belt at his first pay-per-view for the brand. His domination in the hardcore brand is a message from WWE that only homegrown stars will excel within the company, which is bad news for fan favorite C.M. Punk.

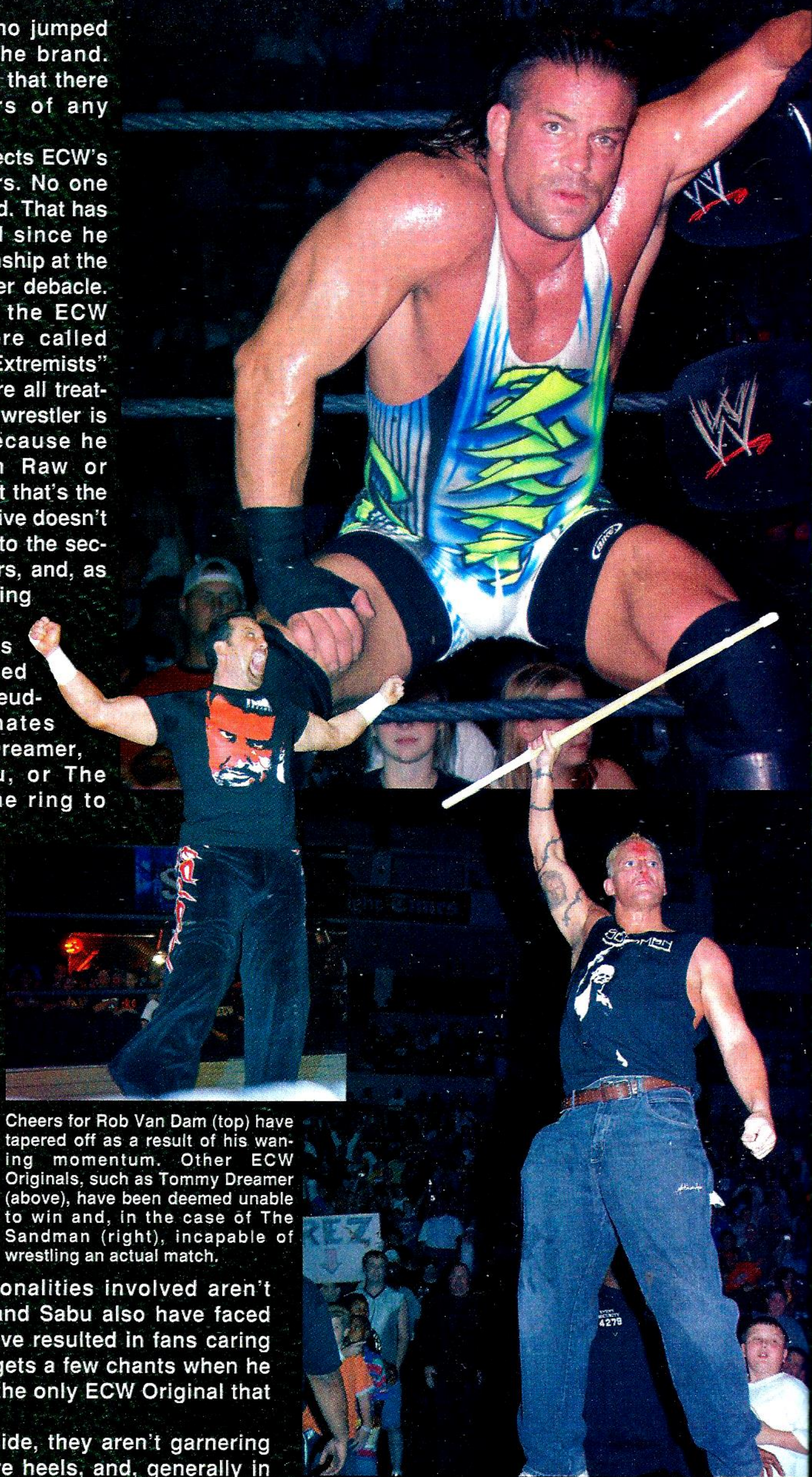
one true WWE star who jumped to ECW, dominates the brand. That sends a message that there are no outside stars of any value.

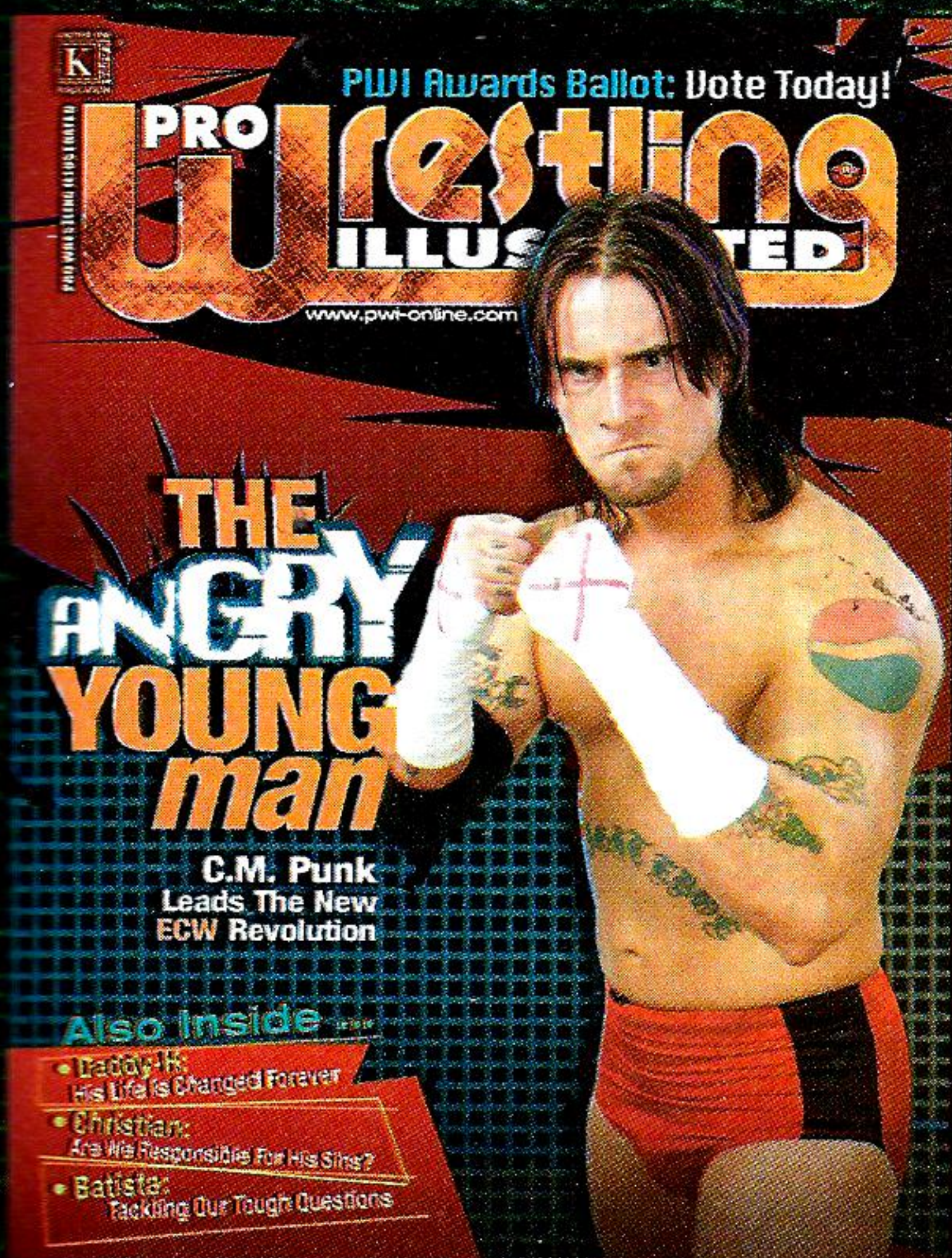
This dramatically affects ECW's mid- and under-carders. No one can beat Lashley. Period. That has been well-established since he won the ECW championship at the December to Dismember debacle. But more than that, the ECW Superstars (who were called "wrestlers" and then "Extremists" on the ECW website) are all treated as second rate. If a wrestler is on ECW now, it is because he couldn't make it on Raw or Smackdown—or at least that's the impression. WWE Creative doesn't give any consideration to the second-tier ECW Superstars, and, as a result, fans are starting not to care.

In the mid-card ranks of ECW, the New Breed and the Originals are feuding over who dominates ECW. When Tommy Dreamer, Rob Van Dam, Sabu, or The Sandman come to the ring to face Elijah Burke, Matt Striker, Marcus Cor Von, or Kevin Thorn, there is little fan reaction. Why? The storyline is intriguing enough. It is possible that WWE has spent so much time painting Dreamer as someone who can't get a win and The Sandman as someone who doesn't actually wrestle (when was the last time he actually had a match?), there's no reason to cheer them. The personalities involved aren't interesting. Van Dam and Sabu also have faced booking issues that have resulted in fans caring less about them. RVD gets a few chants when he hits the ring, but he is the only ECW Original that anyone cares about.

On the New Breed side, they aren't garnering interest because they're heels, and, generally in

Cheers for Rob Van Dam (top) have tapered off as a result of his waning momentum. Other ECW Originals, such as Tommy Dreamer (above), have been deemed unable to win and, in the case of The Sandman (right), incapable of wrestling an actual match.





Punk was the first ECW wrestler to be featured on the cover of *PWI*, which may have worked against him. If his popularity exceeded the push WWE was willing to give him, somebody in high places may have thought it wise to pull on the reins.

wrestling, heels don't sell if there's not a solid fan favorite to beat them. This is not a slight on the work ethic of the Originals or New Breed. All of them work hard in the ring. It is more a testament to WWE Creative's inability to make these wrestlers interesting.

One man has been a standout on the ECW roster. He is the only one to earn a large fan following during the ECW re-launch. That man is C.M. Punk.

Yet Punk is also languishing in ECW's mid-card. Feuds with Hardcore Holly and Mike Knox haven't done much for his career, but he was the only ECW wrestler in this year's WrestleMania "Money-In-The-Bank" ladder match. So, the logical choice would be to put him in a rivalry with Lashley. Have him work hard for the ECW championship. Fans would tune in to see that. Punk would be the underdog, the fan favorite fighting against the corporate power in true ECW fashion. But Punk was a standout in Ring of Honor, and probably isn't seen as fit for a championship run against a Vince McMahon-made star. Punk is the most popular wrestler in ECW. The fact that he's not in the top tier with Lashley illustrates why ECW's current state is so weak.

There are several undercard wrestlers who have slipped into obscurity. Anyone remember Little Guido? Stevie Richards? Where's

Mahoney? Oh, yeah, Snitsky destroyed him in less than a minute. These are talented fan favorites who should be used more often. Even Trinity has been AWOL from ECW, in favor of the WWE-created "Extreme Expose" divas. Why is Snitsky being paraded out instead of the wrestlers fans really want to see?

ECW's challenges lie primarily in its booking. The wrestlers are talented enough to do their part. And although the brand is weak—certainly the weakest of WWE's three brands and perhaps weaker than TNA—there is reason for optimism.

Perhaps a name change is the first step in making this a successful brand. For good or ill, there is a sentimental stigma applied to the ECW name. Since this brand has nothing to do with the original ECW, perhaps a "relaunch" with a new name should be considered. Second, book talent so they are treated as important in the eyes of WWE. If the corporation sees them as important, fans will, too. After all, it's worked for Lashley.

Finally, let them wrestle the matches they can wrestle. The roster has so much potential. Let Rob Van Dam and C.M. Punk live up to that potential. Allow Kevin Thorn and Elijah Burke the opportunity to hone their skills and deliver top-quality matches.

It's time for WWE's bosses to really unleash the New Breed and respect the Originals. If they do, there will be no reason to consider this brand WWE's weakest ... but merely the third strongest. □



ECW has failed to use some of its best resources. Not only are Little Guido and Stevie Richards nowhere to be found, even Trinity has taken a backseat to exhibitionist Kelly Kelly.

States of WRESTLES

Variety continues to be the theme on the independent scene, where a growing number of performers and promotions are succeeding in producing alternatives to WWE and TNA, while testing the limits of their own boundaries

FORGET THE CRAZY, death-defying stunts, exploding caskets wrapped in barbed wire, dizzying camera cuts, clueless commentating rappers, and, yes, even that disturbingly hyper, screaming ring announcer guy.

If the brief experiment that was Wrestling Society X proved anything, it was not the successful implementation of any of the aforementioned elements. Rather, the product served as a barometer for the quality and depth of up-and-coming talent in today's independent landscape.

While WSX was anchored by a handful of "name" performers, such as Vampiro, New Jack,



With talent such as Jesus Aguilera, New Jack, and Sean Waltman, Wrestling Society X seemed to have a good chance of succeeding. Unfortunately, MTV cancelled the show before most fans had even sampled it.

INDEPENDENT TLLING

and 6-Pac (Sean Waltman), the backbone of its roster was made up of many lesser-known indy stars, most of whom gained their first taste of national exposure before MTV pulled the plug on the show.

In the nine episodes of WSX that aired (10 were taped), highly touted prospects such as Jack Evans,

Matt Sydal, Human Tornado, Teddy Hart, Matt Cross, Joey Ryan, and Arik Cannon were given the opportunity to show off their diverse skills, innovative move sets, and unique characters. What is impressive, and even more encouraging, is that WSX's presentation gave only a small sampling of the collective talent base currently available to promoters from coast to coast.

"I followed the WSX product a bit, and had mixed feelings about it. But it was great to

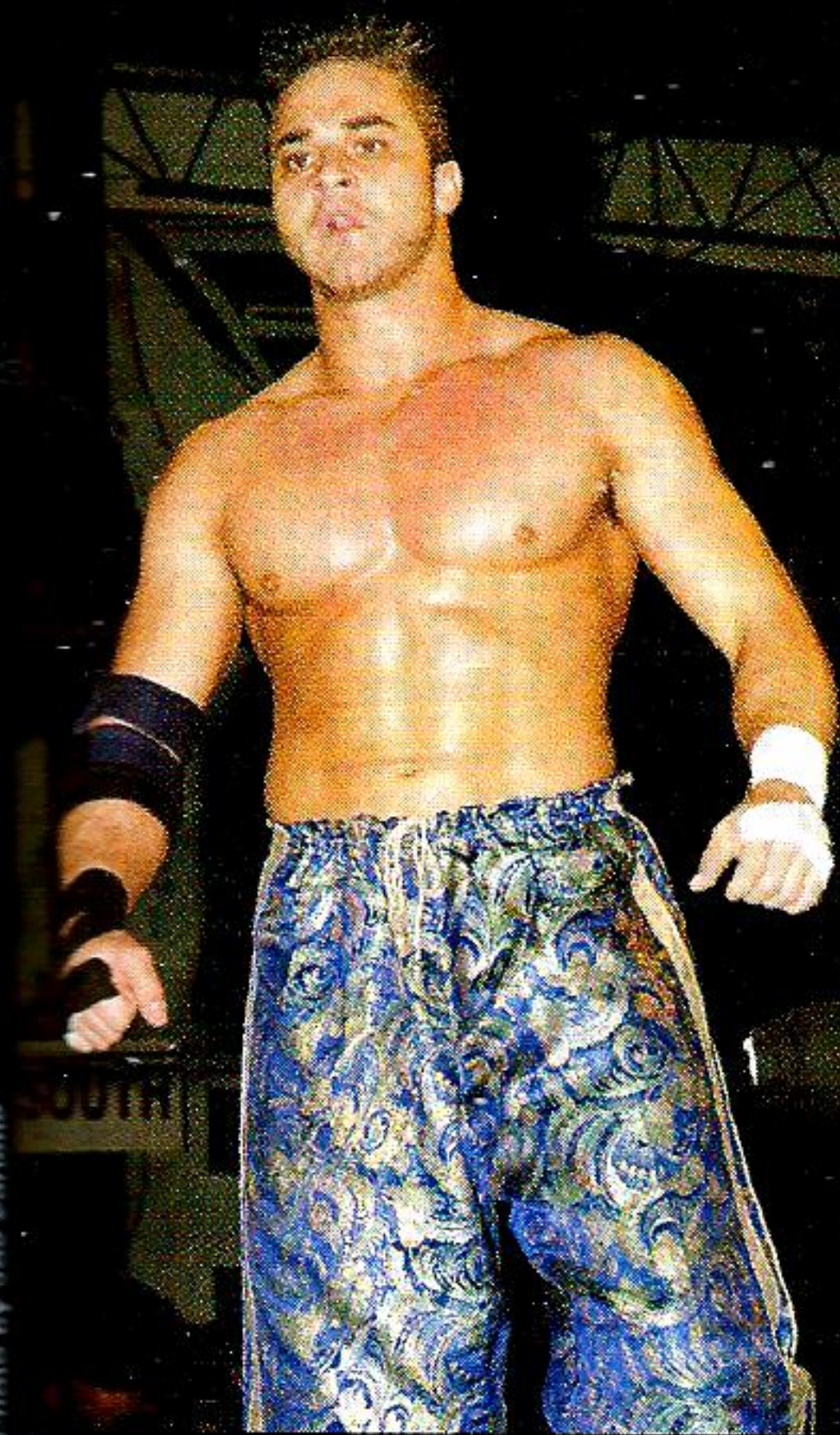
see so many talented young guys get the chance to gain exposure like that," noted longtime indy star and former TNA X division champion "The Fallen Angel" Christopher Daniels, who, at age 35, offers an interesting perspective on the matter of the indy wrestling scene.

"I've been doing this for close to 15 years now, and I can honestly say that I've never seen a class of talent this good. The athleticism of some of the guys coming up is amazing. But, it's their drive and desire to be something different, something truly special, that impresses me the most."

The emergence of this promising crop, combined with the forward-thinking vision and financial stability of a number of established companies across the country, has resulted in a thriving, albeit not quite booming, underground market. Leading the pack, as it has since its inception a half-decade ago, is Ring of Honor. The Philadelphia area-based promotion continues to up the ante, bringing in the best talent available, developing its own stars, and putting on top-quality shows in big cities on the East Coast and in the Midwest.

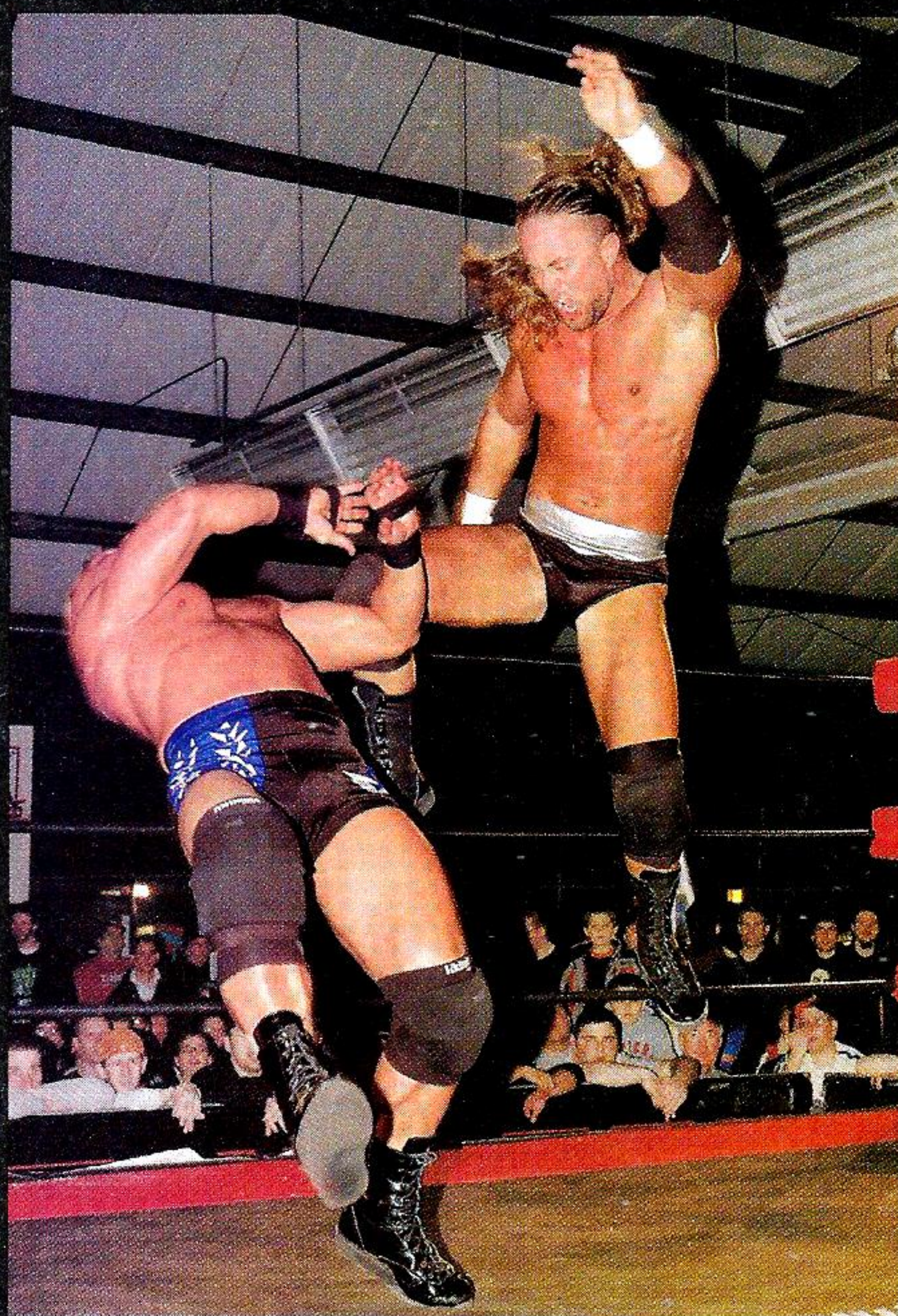
ROH also continues to expand its international horizons. The company recently completed its second tour of England in less than a year. With Liverpool now considered a regular stop on the circuit schedule, can other destinations in Europe and beyond be far behind?

For the first time ever, the ROH title is in the possession of a foreign competitor. NOAH star Takeshi Morishima shocked nearly everyone by defeating



Teddy Hart is one of a growing number of young stars who have national reputations. He's just as famous in Los Angeles (where he wrestled for WSX) as he is in his hometown of Calgary. The term "indy" doesn't necessarily mean regional anymore.

Photo by Joe Zanolle



B.J. Whitmer nails Christopher Daniels with a spinning heel kick at a Ring of Honor show. Although Whitmer recently lost a match to ROH champ Takeshi Morishima, he's still considered one of the most talented up-and-comers in the company.

Homicide to win the gold in February. He has already defended the championship in the U.S. and his native Japan, with more challenges on both sides of the globe in the works.

Thus, the international prestige and reputation of ROH continues to grow. But the promotion is doing just fine domestically as well.

Like its counterparts, ROH thrives not on the profits from its live shows, but on the strength of its DVD and other product sales. The company generally draws solid numbers to its events, but it's the perpetual crowd around the merchandise stand (and, of course, the strength of online sales) that has promoter Gabe Sapolsky smiling these days.

"The DVD industry is the lifeblood of these indy promotions," explained a representative of one of the more prominent wrestling video distributors, who requested anonymity. "I'll admit, it was Ring of Honor that started the trend a few years ago, proving that a company could operate and succeed on the profits of its tape sales. It has, and continues to do, very well in that regard.

"If the quality of the product is high, people will want to see it and word of mouth can spread quick-

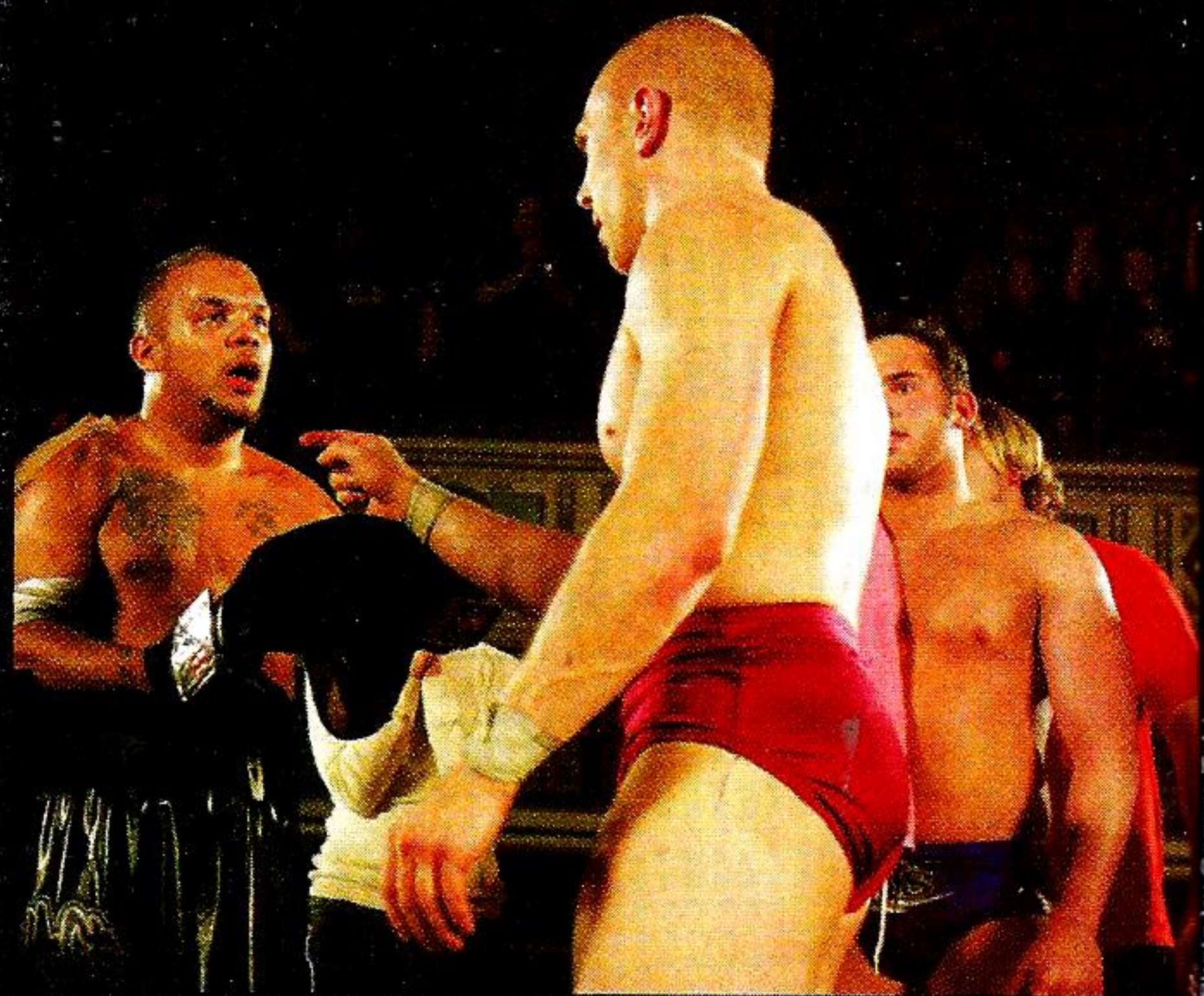
ly, thanks to the Internet. There's no reason for ROH or any of the other indies to even seek out a television slot, like some tried to do in the past. As DVD-exclusive products, they get the best of both worlds, with much less expense and hassle."

Still, offering a product with only one primary revenue stream (in this case, video sales) is no easy task. This is why many organizations are now leaning on mediums such as their own official websites and YouTube to help promote—and, in some cases, introduce—their goods to the masses.

Interestingly, the National Wrestling Alliance has taken huge steps forward in the realm of electronic communication over the past year. With close to 50 affiliate members under its banner, the NWA remains the largest governing body of independent promotions in the world. The alliance uses its website to keep its members and fans up to date on current info, cross-promote events between different promotions, and feature vintage and current video clips.

With the very real possibility that the NWA will soon end its affiliation with TNA, it may look to crown a new NWA champion in the near future. If so, the prospective field figures to be a crowded and competitive one. Fortunately, unlike similar situations in the past, fans will be able to follow the process and its developments every step of the way, thanks to the Internet.

Another promotion that has used its website to the fullest of its potential is Combat Zone Wrestling. After its brutal and bitter inter-promotional war with ROH last year, CZW saw its profile raised and experienced a sharp spike in interest. The company moved to hook potential new fans with a variety of



Homicide's ROH title victory over Bryan Danielson was a very memorable moment at the end of 2006. Homicide is a favorite to regain the ROH championship from Takeshi Morishima, but Danielson has opted to ply his trade in the NWA and Japan.

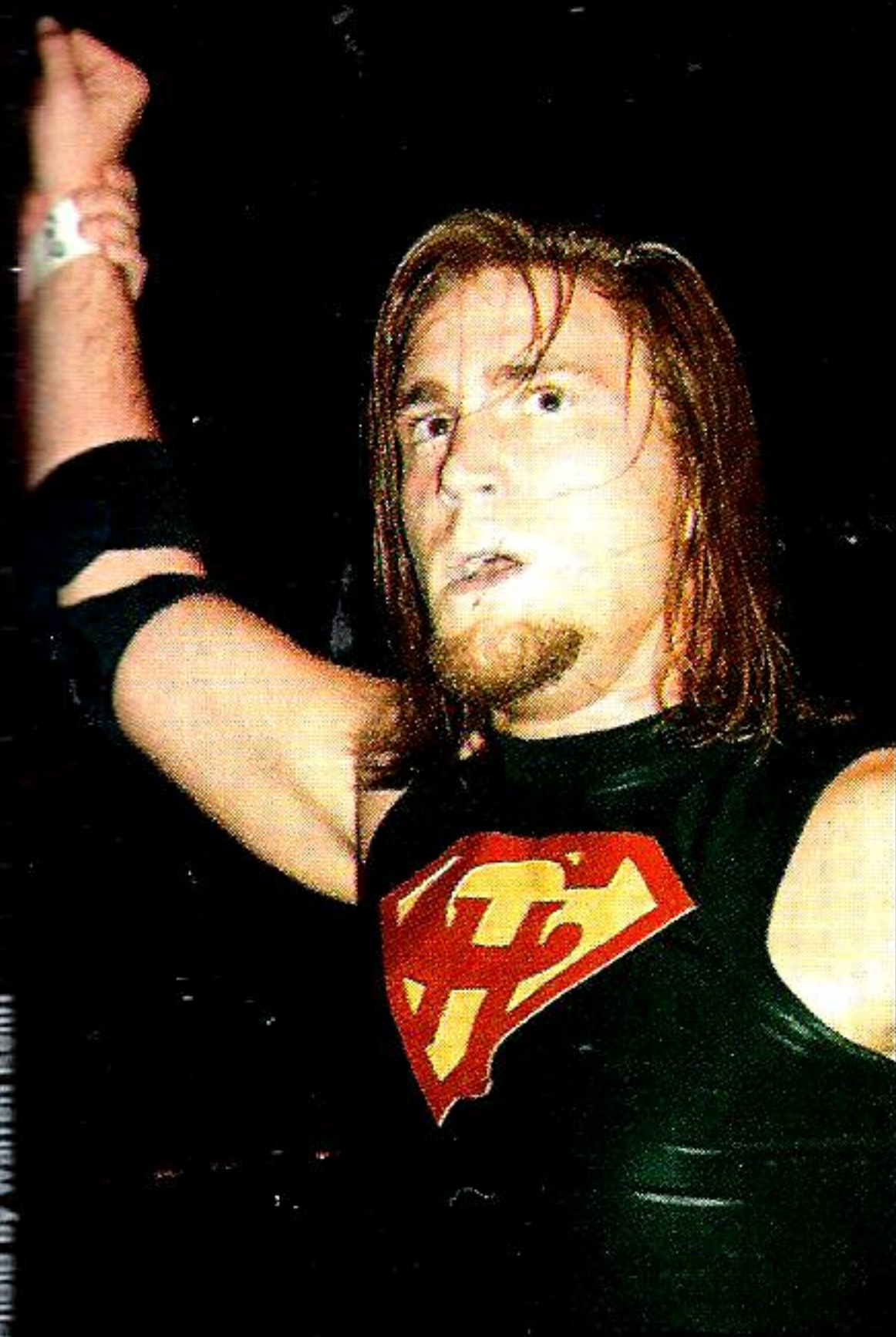


Photo by Warren Keith

Chris Hero often has his arm raised in victory, whether he competes in ROH, IWA Mid-South, or Windy City Wrestling. Perhaps the indy scene will propel Hero to greater success, as it did his friend and rival, C.M. Punk.

features, the most notable being the posting of show results in real time, along with a running commentary of each event.

CZW continues to cater to the hardcore audience, showcasing violent, bloody matches that more often than not include the use of various types of weaponry. The promotion's most famous innovation, the "Cage Of Death," escalated to new heights of insanity

this past December, with the eighth edition of the match.

Speaking of signature events, IWA Mid-South's Ted Petty Invitational and CZW's Best of the Best tournament have not only become highlights of the annual independent calendar, but also valuable assets in terms of drawing interest and DVD sales for the respective companies. CHIKARA's Young Lions Cup, a tournament in which the winner claims a trophy that must be subsequently defended throughout the year, is also gaining prestige.

Jim Kettner's solid ECWA promotion is overshadowed by its annual Super 8 tournament. After celebrating its 10th Super 8 in 2006, a 2007 date had not yet been announced at press time, though the promotion insists this hotly anticipated event will take place.

Special events aside, IWA Mid-South—which had been rumored to be in severe financial trouble—appears to be on solid footing and continues to present a blend of technical, high-flying, and hardcore action while producing some of the best young talent around. The company still draws well in its strongholds of Midlothian, Illinois, and Shelbyville, Indiana. Owner Ian Rotten also schedules an occasional venture to a familiar haunt, the New Alhambra Arena (formerly the ECW Arena) in Philly. It's quite a distance to travel for a Midwest-based promotion, but always seems to be worth it.

Jersey All Pro Wrestling also promotes shows at the New Alhambra from time to time, as does

CHIKARA. CZW, of course, calls the venue its home, assuring that fans continue to pack the venerable old bingo hall on a regular basis.

Florida-based Full Impact Pro, the sister promotion of ROH (both are booked by Sapolsky), continues to make a name for itself down south with its "wrestlers make the matches" credo, while Dave Prazak's SHIMMER, the only all-female company in North America, has earned rave reviews over its first year-and-a-half of operation.

Rounding out the top tier of current indy promotions is Los Angeles-based Pro Wrestling Guerrilla, which, like CHIKARA, presents a blend of athleticism, innovation, and comedy. PWG is unique in that it is owned and operated by several of the wrestlers who compete for the company, most notably Super Dragon.

Other notables, though not independents in the purest sense, are Ohio Valley Wrestling and Deep South Wrestling, companies that provide developmental programs for WWE. Both continue to serve as training grounds for the big company, and have the luxury of Vince McMahon's financial support. But with the growth and success of so many promotions not affiliated with WWE, fans are able to choose from a variety of options for wrestling entertainment. □



Photo by Warren Keith

Claudio Castagnoli takes his mentor, Mike Quackenbush, to the mat during a CHIKARA show. For a while, it looked as if Castagnoli were headed for WWE ... until the offer was abruptly pulled. His indy career continues to thrive, though.

State of WRESTLES

One word sums up the state of the international scene: diverse. While traditional Japanese companies struggle against stiff MMA competition, Mexican promotions are experiencing another wrestling boom. And continental Europe, where wrestling had been dormant for decades, is making a comeback

TIMES ARE TOUGH on the Japanese puroresu scene. With the booming popularity of mixed martial arts companies such as Pride and the UFC, fans are more and more attracted to that end of the grappling spectrum while traditional pro wrestling promotions like New Japan and All Japan are suffering through the worst financial straits of their existence.

Newer groups such as Pro Wrestling NOAH and Dragon Gate still draw respectably and have found



Keiji Muto temporarily helped All Japan's business—both as a performer and as company president—when he jumped from New Japan a few years ago. At 44, Muto (as The Great Muta) is still going strong.

INTERNATIONAL TLLING

enough loyal fans to not just survive, but thrive. However, some smaller companies—such as Michinoku Pro, Zero One Max, and Osaka Pro Wrestling—have experienced shrinking fan bases, as their attendance numbers have seen a steady decline over the

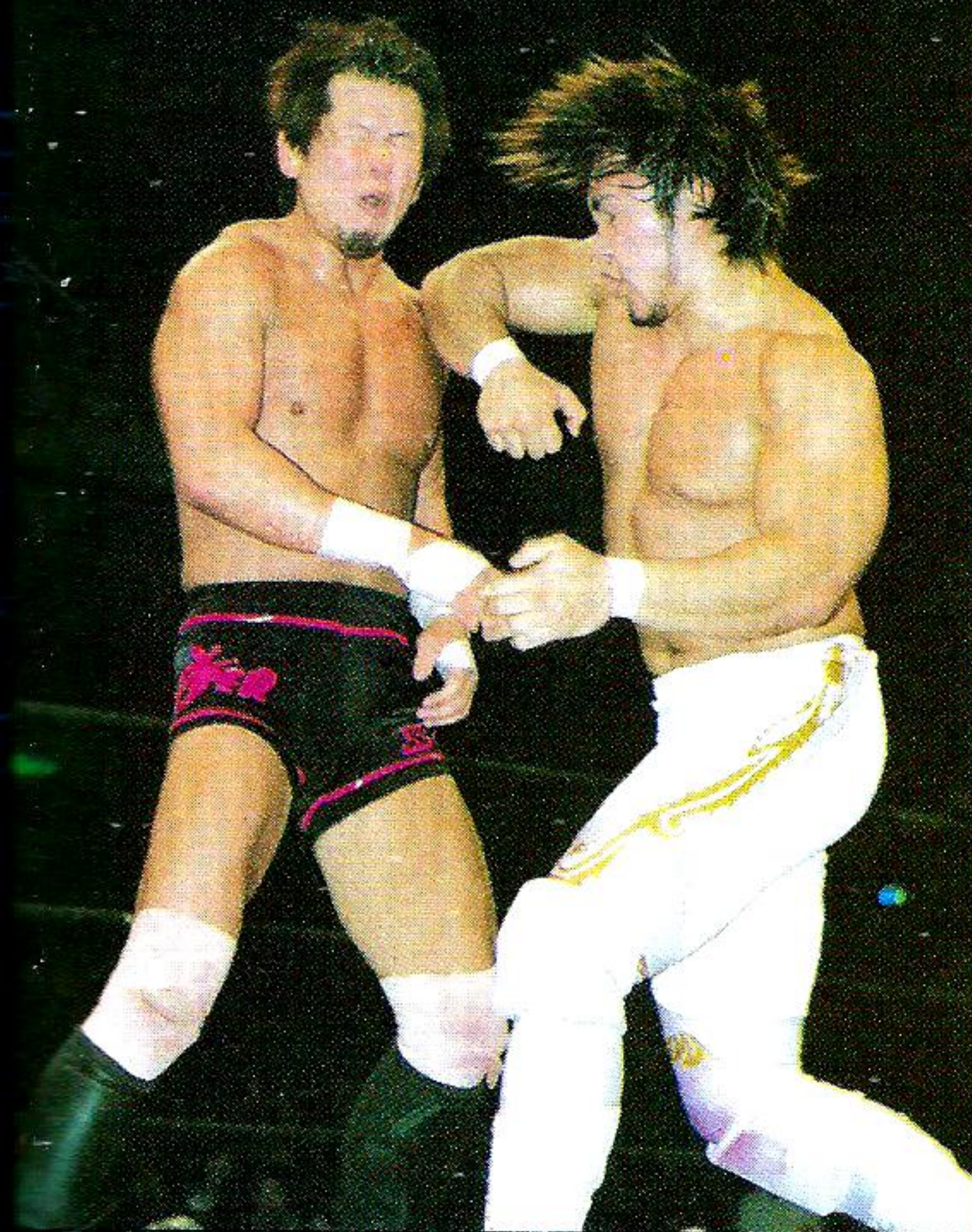
past two to three years. Stuck in the middle are New Japan and All Japan, the two pillar promotions of puroresu, dating back to the 1970s.

Currently, New Japan seems to have a revolving-door policy of installing a new company president and—just as the promotion seems to get up and running again—yanking that person out of power. The result has been years of inconsistency, peppered with the usual craziness of company founder Antonio Inoki alternately trying to save or destroy New Japan, depending on what press conference he's attending that day. Fans have criticized recent cards as being stale, but new stars such as Hiroshi Tanahashi and Milano Collection A.T. have started to amass solid followings.

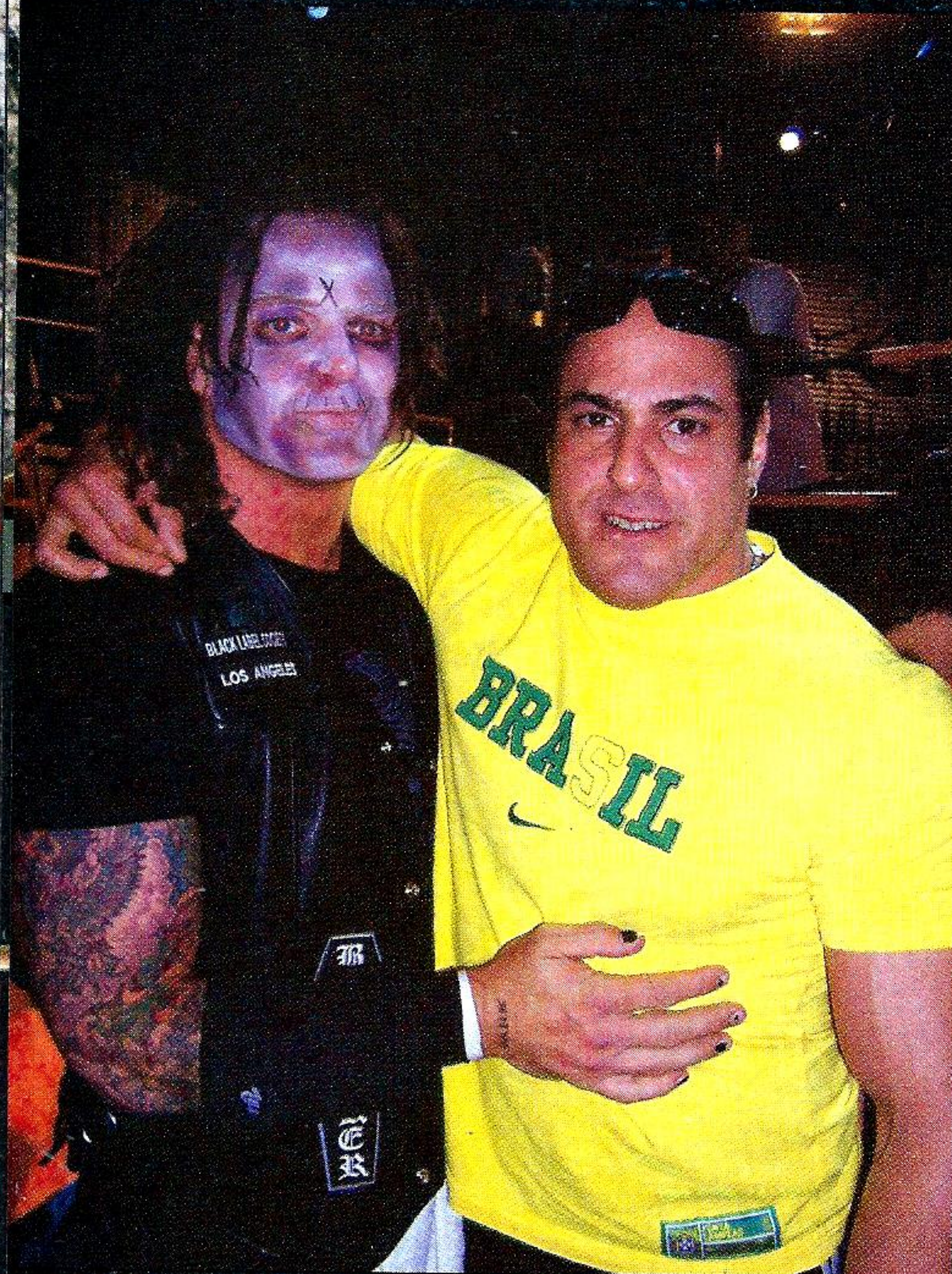
Since the 2000 talent exodus that started Pro Wrestling NOAH, All Japan Pro Wrestling has

been ailing. When Keiji Muto jumped from New Japan to save the All Japan promotion, it gave the company a boost and helped buy it some time, but things really haven't been the same. Since 2000, All Japan has fallen from its position as the most respected of the major promotions to a status closer to the independent level. Starved for superstars, the company has virtually no presence on Japanese television these days, and even annual traditions such as the Champions Carnival and the Real World Tag League tournament are pale shadows of what they were a decade ago.

A simple, but stark, indicator of the state of business in Japan is the recent demise of *Weekly GONG*, a pro wrestling magazine that, for the past few decades, brought hundreds of pages of gorgeous color photographs and comprehensive results to Japanese fans every single week. With low circulation numbers due to flagging interest in the puroresu scene, *GONG* at first suspended business and then shut down completely. Another weekly periodical, *Weekly Puroresu* (from the same company that published



WGP champion Hiroyoshi Tanahashi punches Koji Kanemoto during this February 18 show in Tokyo. Fortunately for New Japan, Tanahashi is gaining a following as its top star.



Like Vampiro, Ricky Banderas enjoyed his greatest success outside the mainland U.S. before pursuing a career stateside. Both Vampiro and Banderas appeared in Wrestling Society X earlier this year.

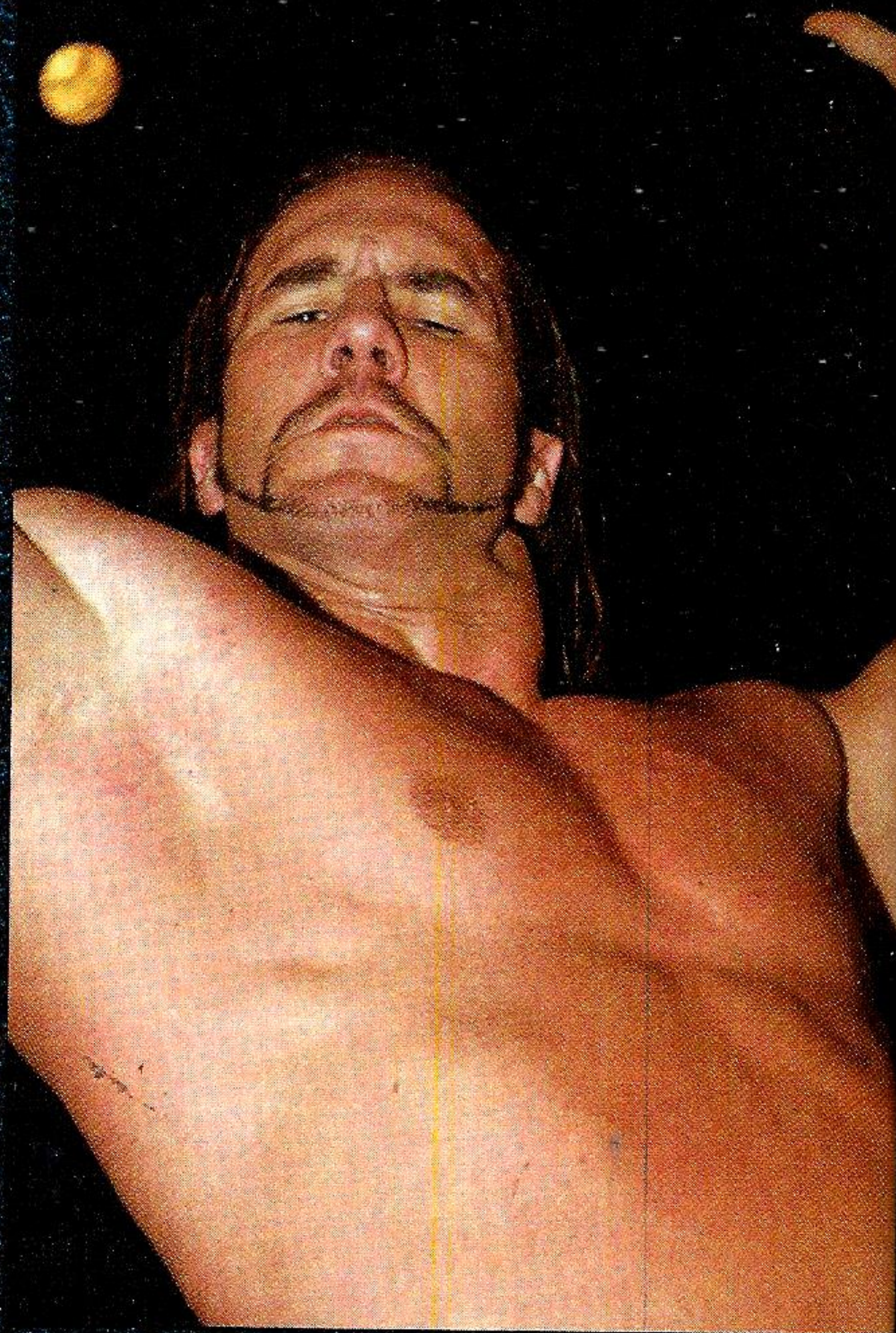
Baseball Magazine Sha), remains, but with a diminished page count.

Apart from NOAH and Dragon Gate, most of the modern puroresu promotions are surviving because of their dedicated cult followings. HUSTLE and Big Japan are examples of companies with unique takes on pro wrestling and/or sports entertainment, but with few crossover fans from other groups. For the Japanese scene to rebound in the next year, something or someone must steal the spotlight back from mixed martial arts.

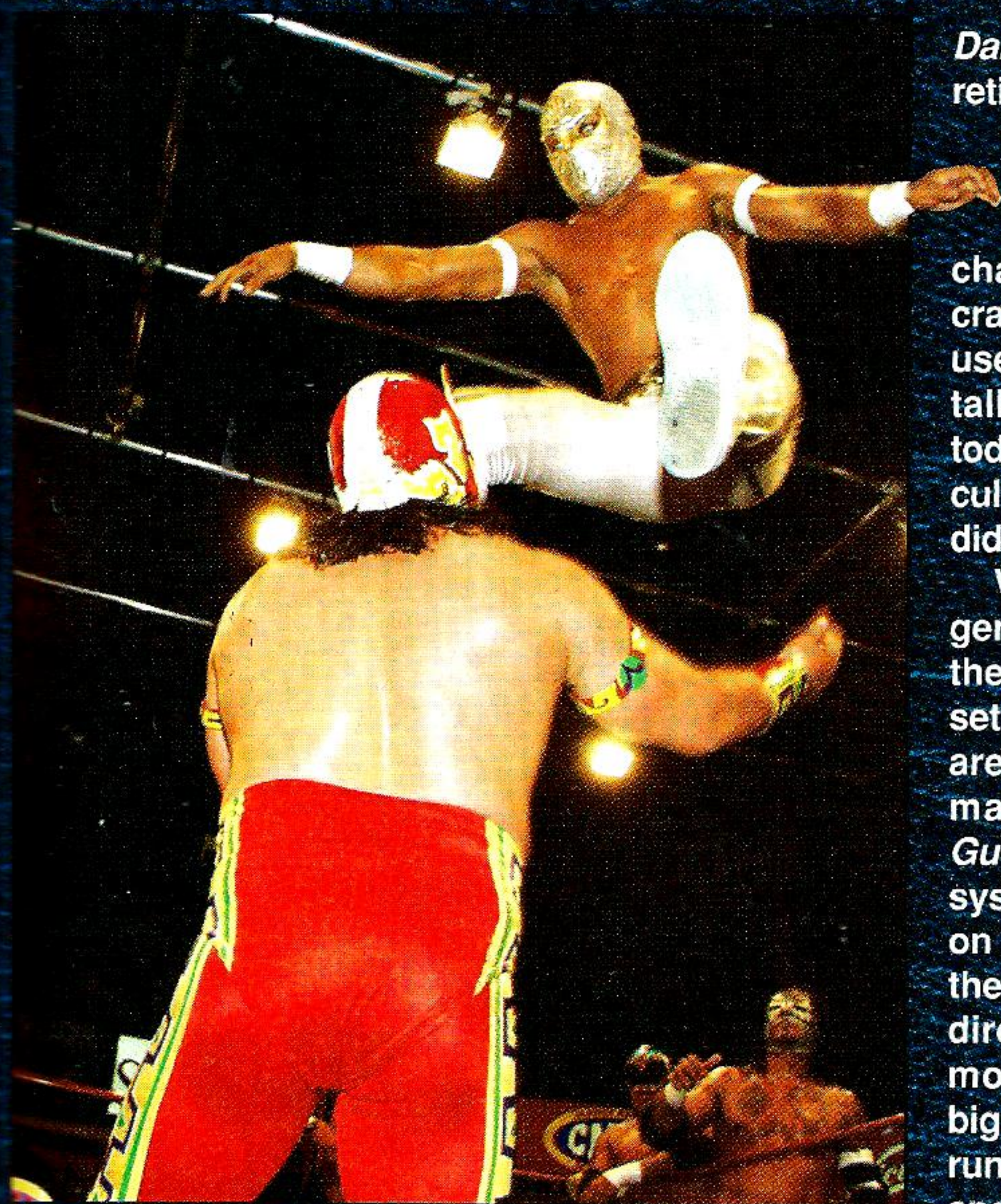
One place where the MMA boom hasn't impacted the pro wrestling business is the United Kingdom and continental Europe. After the late-1980s demise of World Of Sport in Great Britain, Europeans were exposed only to whatever WWF programs were available via satellite. These days, the European scene is back and enjoying its greatest success of the past 20 years. England, Germany, Italy, and France all have multiple wrestling organizations, ranging from small to large, catering to fans of all ages.

A great indication of the state of wrestling in Europe is the King of Europe tournament. A few years ago, the idea of staging a global-scale tournament in England would have seemed laughable. The scene has changed radically in the past four years, and the European circuit is now the place to be. That's why stars from the U.S., Mexico, Canada, and Japan all clamor for spots in the tournament. Even though the American style is predominant on the European continent these days, the never-forgotten German catch and British Lancashire styles are making a comeback.

Across the Atlantic, Puerto Rico isn't quite the hotbed it was in the 1980s, but the scene has remained stable in the U.S. territory, with the World Wrestling Council and IWA Puerto Rico at the forefront. Some of Puerto Rico's biggest stars have ventured away from the island—Carlito Colon is enjoying great fame in WWE, and Ricky Banderas is a top player in Mexico's AAA—but many of the scene's legendary figures, such as Savio Vega and Miguel Perez Jr., still anchor the circuit.



As a result of continental Europe's current wrestling boom, Swiss-born Claudio Castagnoli has the potential to be a crossover star. The up-and-coming indy wrestler is completely at ease in the ring, whether that ring is in Philadelphia or Vienna.



One of the most talented high-flyers in the world, Mistico has been ranked number one in *PWI's* Mexico ratings for over a year. Mistico was so impressive during a recent WWE tryout that he was offered a contract. But he has not accepted an offer as of press time.

Down Mexico way, the lucha libre world is coming off a banner year. In 2006, lucha libre attendance records were broken, and live events by the score were promoted all around the country. Mexico's three wrestling hotbeds—Tijuana, Mexico City, and Monterrey—got even hotter, and cities like Acapulco and Mexicali made major comebacks. Lucha libre is "cool" again to the mainstream, and a lot of that can be attributed to superstars such as Mistico, Latin Lover, Perro Aguayo Jr., and Cibernetico. The evidence is everywhere; you'll see their names and faces on T-shirts throughout Mexico.

Lucha libre diehards—as well as countless casual fans, including high numbers of women and children—are drawn to CMLL mainstays Mistico and Aguayo Jr. These two young sensations have hectic touring schedules, making as many as a dozen appearances throughout Mexico per week. Being in such high demand has caused both to cut back their television appearances, meaning that fans are more likely to buy tickets when these stars come to town.

Latin Lover and Cibernetico, most famous for their work with AAA, have helped keep the company afloat since the death of promoter Antonio Pena last October. Latin Lover became a mainstream star thanks to appearances on Mexico's version of

Dancing With The Stars, and although he flirted with retirement, he's back with the company that helped him develop into a national star. Cibernetico, the company's most popular wrestler, is a rudo in the same mold as the old Steve Austin character: an unpredictable renegade with a fire-cracker temper. Cibernetico suffered an injury and used his time off to make the rounds on Mexican talk shows, and he's as visible as any luchador today. These characters function in the Mexican pop culture roughly the same way Austin and The Rock did in the United States at the turn of the millennium.

While 2007 has failed to deliver the same staggering gates and ratings that 2006 did in Mexico, the changing landscape and new rising stars are setting the stage for an even better 2008. And fans are as charged as ever. Every week, three lucha magazines (*Super Luchas*, *Luchas 2000*, and *Guerreros Del Ring*) are published, and most cable systems air at least five hours of lucha each week on television. With AAA under new management in the post-Pena era, the company is trying out new directions and concepts. AAA is already gaining momentum, and the company is poised for its biggest run ever. The steadfast CMLL—the longest-running promotion on the planet—is hanging neck-and-neck with the competition, both in the arenas and on television. If Paco Alonso and crew can create another star along the lines of Mistico, they'll break their own records in no time. □



Cibernetico recently made great use of his downtime due to an injury. He appeared on talk shows throughout Mexico, raising his profile higher than ever. His explosive personality is often compared to that of Steve Austin.

State of THE STARS

John Cena. Batista. Bobby Lashley. Samoa Joe. They're just a few of the impact players in this business. We know where their careers have been in recent months, but exactly what is their status right now? And where are their careers headed? We provide some insights

WHILE THIS REPORT is not intended to be a mini-*"PWI 500,"* inclusion in the "State Of The Stars" is limited to 14, so just being on the list does say quite a bit about a wrestler's importance to the sport. After a very volatile year, 11 of the 14 wrestlers we examined in 2006 remain.

The extensive injuries to Triple-H and Rey Mysterio Jr. have been well-documented. Prior to their surgeries, both men were considered MVPs for their respective brands. Both Triple-H and Mysterio Jr. regularly put on some of the most exciting matches for their respective brands, and the fact that WWE did so well without them says quite a bit about the state of WWE as a whole.

While Triple-H and Mysterio's absence from this year's "State Of The Stars" can be excused by a mere doctor's note, the dropping of Carlito from this elite list is probably somewhat more controversial. Even though he is considered by many to have a bright future in the business, the second-generation star's momentum and progress on Raw have stalled in the past year. In fact, all of the feelings about WWE officials toward Carlito can be found in Ric Flair's

pre-WrestleMania Raw diatribe against what he deems as Carlito's seemingly wasted potential. Whether or not Carlito can rebound from a disappointing year to find the heart he seems to have lost, his career will almost certainly be an interesting one to follow throughout the rest of 2007 and beyond.

This year's "State Of The Stars" includes the debut of two new elite wrestling stars, as well as the return from injury for one of the most explosive wrestlers in WWE history.

For months leading up to his "Money In The Bank" ladder match victory at WrestleMania 23, Ken Kennedy was on the verge of having *it*—that special quality you find only once in a rare while in a wrestling star. Kennedy exudes the type of charisma that hasn't been around since The Rock. He can also deliver moves comparable to Jeff Hardy despite weighing an additional 20 to 30 pounds.

Flipping the dial to Sci Fi, C.M. Punk has caught on in ECW and connected with many fans in much the same way Rob Van Dam did before him. Punk offers no frills and a no-nonsense attitude personified by men such as Chris Benoit and Bret Hart, while retaining the hardcore edge that makes him

TARS

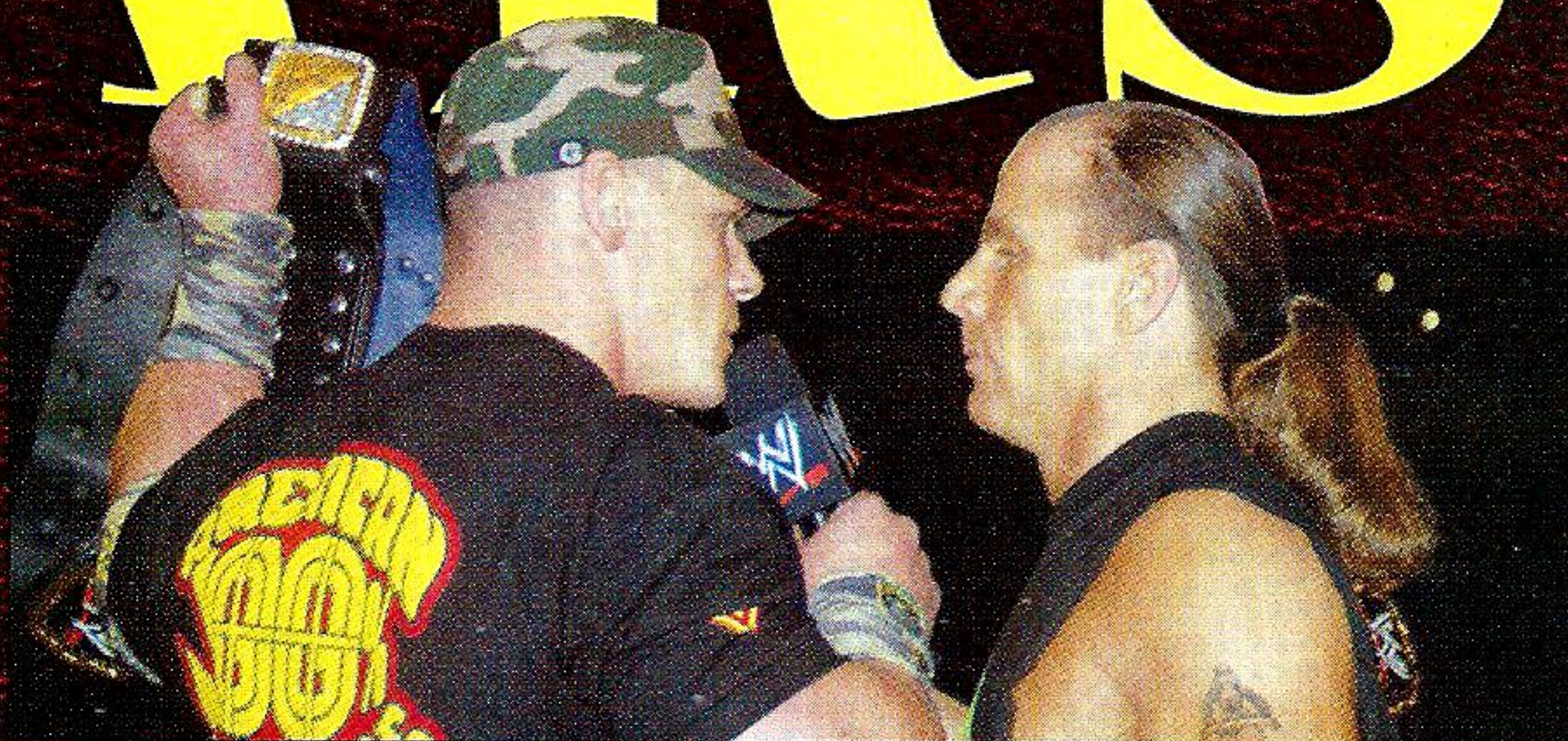
stand out among his current ECW peers.

Finally, joining the group of 14 after a one-year absence is Batista. The two-time world champion made his return from a partially torn right triceps muscle to feud with King Booker and ultimately take his Smackdown World title. And even though The Undertaker derailed Batista at WrestleMania 23, he remains one of the most popular wrestlers in the sport. How he is viewed by many of his peers behind the curtain, however, we're not quite sure. Intrigued? Read on.

John Cena

Despite public outcries that remain at nearly every live event, from shows to WrestleMania, John Cena remains the most dominant Raw World champion in recent memory. Cena has outlasted some of the top talents in the world—including Shawn Michaels, Triple-H, Edge, and Rob Van Dam—to remain at the top of his profession. Whether met with squeals of glee or the threat of riot, the ending for nearly every Cena match in recent history has been the same—the FU finisher, usually followed by the STF submission hold.

With the only real blemish on Cena's resume being a brief hiccup of a title loss to Rob Van Dam at the height of the ECW renaissance, Cena regained the Raw World title in 2006 and had a



With former tag team partner Shawn Michaels after his belt and so many fans on HBK's side, Cena's title has been in serious jeopardy. But, as proven at WrestleMania, Cena can handle any threat to his belt ... even from "The Heartbreak Kid."

strong showing in the "Champion Of Champions" match at Cyber Sunday against then-Smackdown and ECW titleholders King Booker and The Big Show. Had it not been for some untimely interference by Kevin Federline, Cena might well have been "Champion Of Champions" as well.

Heading into WrestleMania 23, it became apparent that there were few Raw wrestlers capable of unseating Cena as champion. A quadriceps tear for Triple-H narrowed this field even more drastically, leaving Helmsley's DeGeneration X partner, Shawn Michaels, as the heir apparent for the main-event slot at WrestleMania. And Michaels, like so many others, tapped out to the STFU despite the urgings of the vast majority of fans.

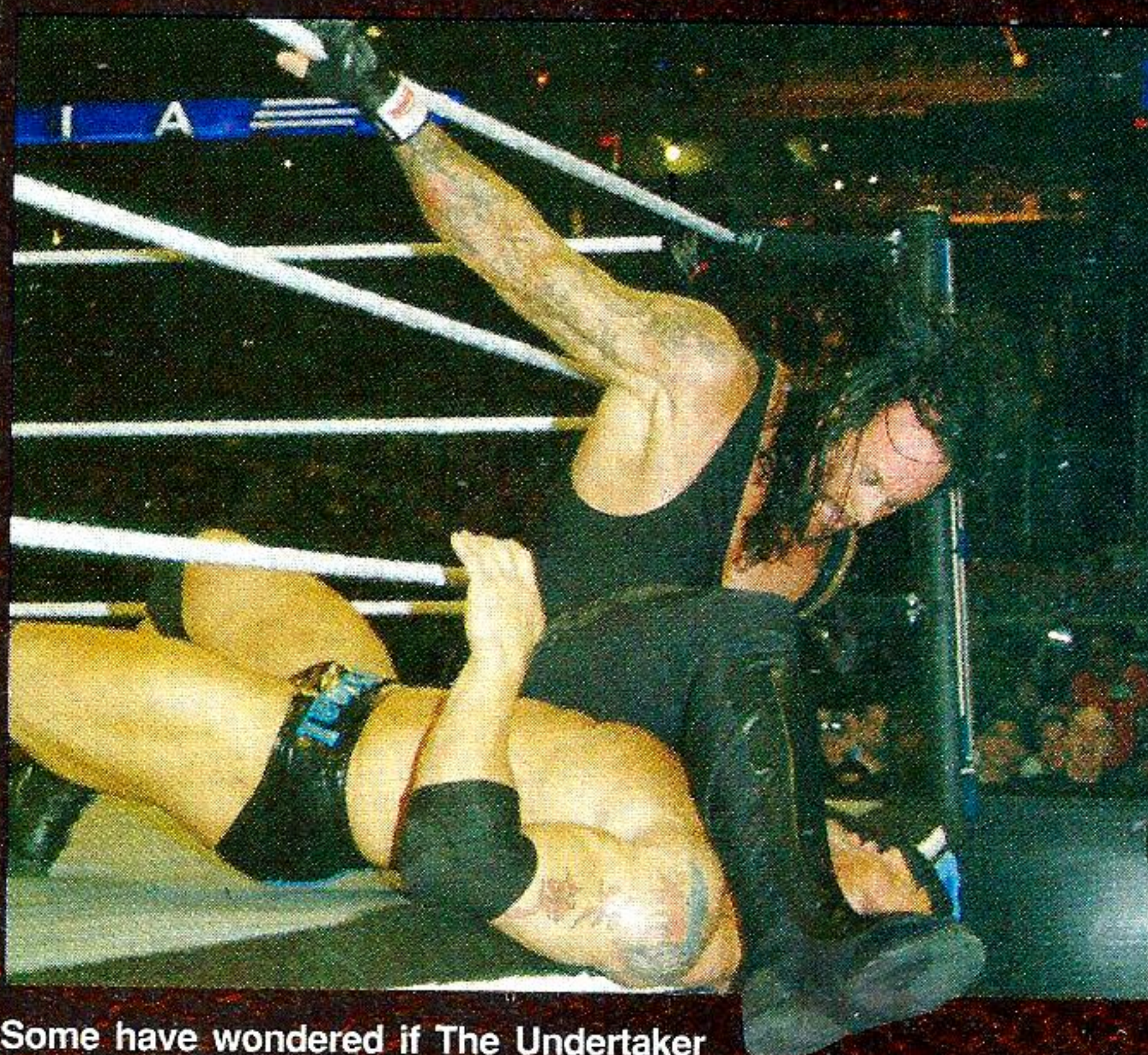
While not universally respected like HBK, Cena has slowly been able to win over more and more fans, particularly where he had been weakest: males in the 18 to 34 demographic. The beating he put on Kevin Federline earned him

some new support, but more importantly, fans are beginning to recognize his dedication and intensity. By this time next year, who knows, the guys in the crowd might out-cheer the girls and youngsters.

The Undertaker

Over the years, The Undertaker has provided a crutch for WWE officials, presenting a viable main-event challenger who is just as capable of working the second match on a card. And—when called upon—The Undertaker is capable of delivering against almost anyone.

Now 15-0 at WrestleMania, The Undertaker remains a top draw on Smackdown and is now a five-time world champion. His limited action in recent years (which were quite often followed by months of inactivity) have allowed WWE's longest-serving member of the active roster to recover from many of



Some have wondered if The Undertaker could continue at the same quality of competition into his 40s. "The Dead Man" has proven, by Royal Rumble and Smackdown World title wins, that age has not slowed him down.

the nagging injuries that slow down wrestlers who are around his age. As evidenced by his big Royal Rumble and WrestleMania 23 wins this year, The Undertaker is just as popular as ever with the fans.

Backstage, 'Taker is a lockerroom leader and just as well-received by many of his peers. He is a respected member of the WWE family, and the only competitor that has helped bridge the gap between the eras of Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage, Steve Austin and The Rock, and John Cena and Batista, respectively. And he's also been successful against each of them.

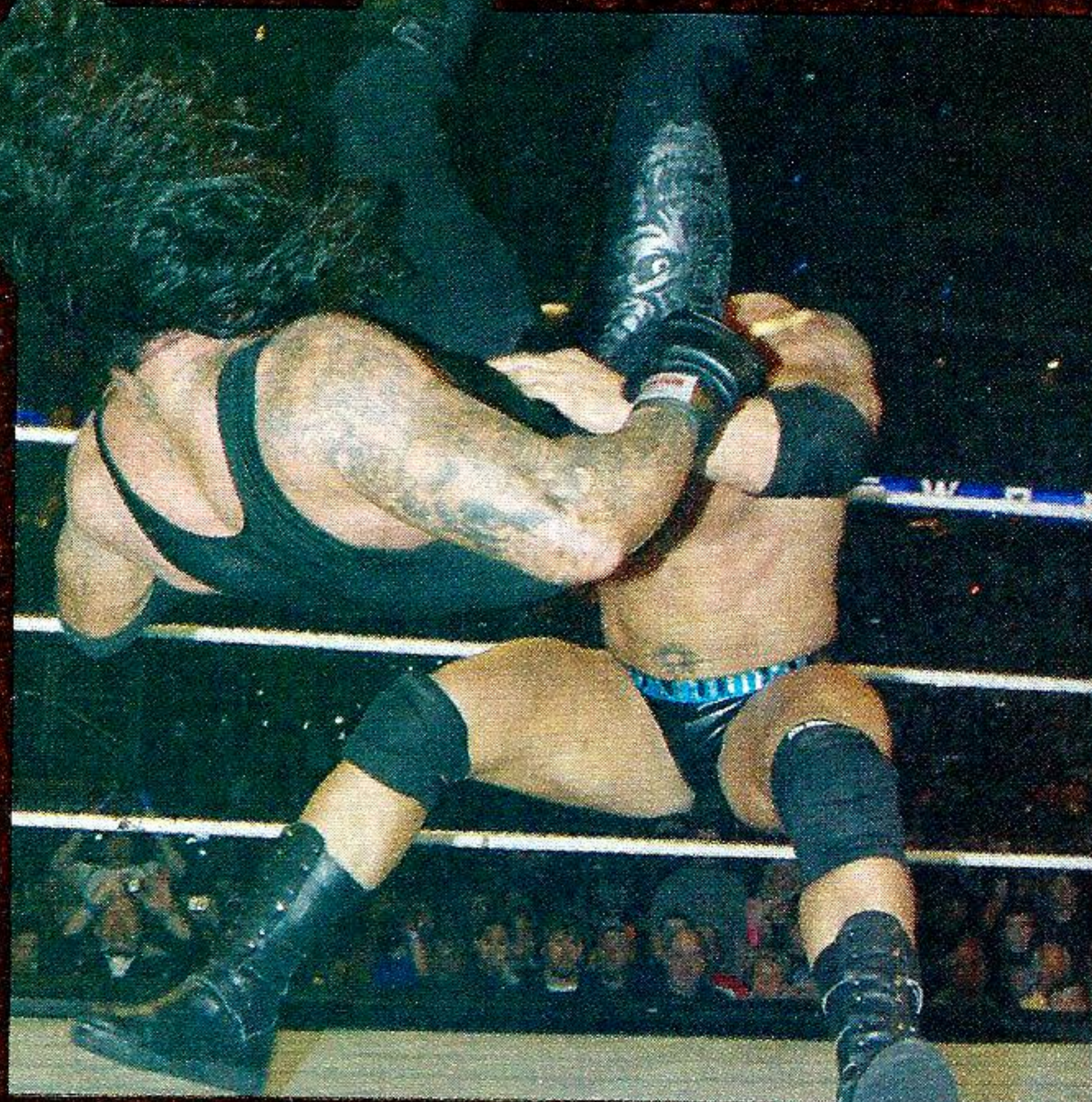
More than a year ago, The Undertaker received high marks for his stellar match against then-Smackdown champion Kurt Angle at No Way Out.

Many postulated that the aging Undertaker would find it increasingly difficult to compete at such a level as time went on. But, if his WrestleMania match against Batista is any indication, The Undertaker is well ahead of others his age ... as well as quite possibly all those wrestlers 10 to 20 years younger.

Batista

Batista remains very popular with the fans in live arenas, sells a lot of merchandise, and continues to be a top attraction each week on Smackdown. Unfortunately for the two-time champ, his name conjures up memories of the well-publicized backstage brawl with Booker T last May. That's unfortunate. To the best of our knowledge, that was a one-time deal, and there is no indication that Batista has had any further problems getting along with his peers. If anything, that incident probably was good for both him and Booker.

There is no doubt that Batista has been good for Smackdown. Since exploding back onto the Smackdown scene in the summer of 2006 after rehabbing a torn triceps muscle, he remains one of the brand's top wrestlers. "The Animal" powered his way to victory over Mark Henry, Kane, Ken Kennedy, and then-World champion King Booker before hitting a massive brick wall in the form of The Undertaker at WrestleMania.



Batista had a tough year before reestablishing his Smackdown supremacy against King Booker at Survivor Series. 2007 didn't get much easier. Despite an excellent showing against The Undertaker at WrestleMania, Batista came up short.

Even still, nobody has come as close as Batista to ending The Undertaker's undefeated streak at WrestleMania, and it is difficult to argue with the success he has experienced in the ring each week as a key figure on WWE's Friday night program. If Batista stays healthy, he will remain one of WWE's top stars as long as desires.

Kurt Angle

While it is difficult to argue that WWE was not correct in releasing Kurt Angle from his contract in August 2006, it might be just as difficult to say TNA was not correct in signing the multiple-time world titleholder. Angle brought a pedigree to TNA that is unmatched by any other wrestler on the promotion's roster. In the eyes of many TNA fans, Angle put the young company on a nearly level playing field with WWE.

Angle has now faced several of the top talents in TNA,



When WWE dropped Angle because of health risks, TNA made its most important signing in company history. TNA has high hopes that its lighter schedule can extend his career.

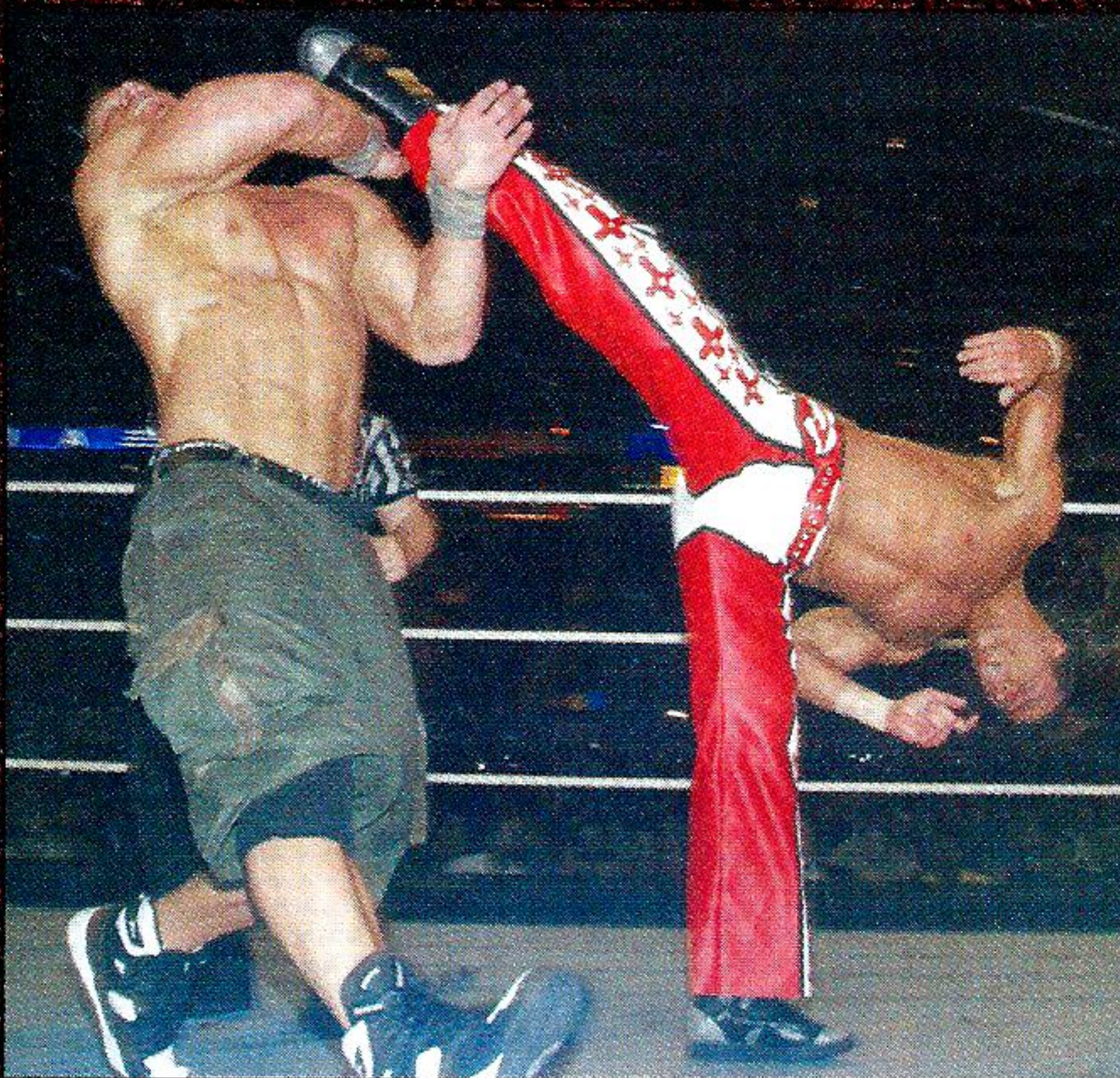
notably Samoa Joe, Abyss, Christian Cage, and Scott Steiner, and has continually come out on top in nearly each instance. By adding one of WWE's top competitors to its roster, TNA immediately legitimizes the talent that goes up against Angle each week, win, lose, or draw. And even though he has yet to win the NWA World title, few would argue that Angle won't be able to squeeze in a reign as champion before making his New Year's plans.

Still, Angle's detractors believe that it is only a matter of time until the personal issues that forced WWE to release Angle resurface. Angle is on the downside of a great career. However, considering the impact he has had on TNA, Angle definitely deserves placement among the sport's elite stars.

Shawn Michaels

At an age when many wrestlers' careers begin to wind down and thoughts turn toward retirement, Shawn Michaels remains perhaps the most charismatic, entertaining wrestler on Raw.

And, as we near the 10-year anniversary of the "career-ending" back injury that Michaels suffered in 1998, it becomes apparent that this top Raw contender and DX member has made one of the most remarkable comebacks in history. Michaels underwent a career renaissance five years ago with a supposed one-time farewell match against then-Raw World champ Triple-H. Looking back on that SummerSlam 2002 match and Michaels' headlining match against Cena at WrestleMania 23, it is obvious that HBK's eventual



A participant in seven of PWf's Matches of the Years, Shawn Michaels is a consistent crowd-pleaser.

retirement will leave a massive void in the Raw roster someday.

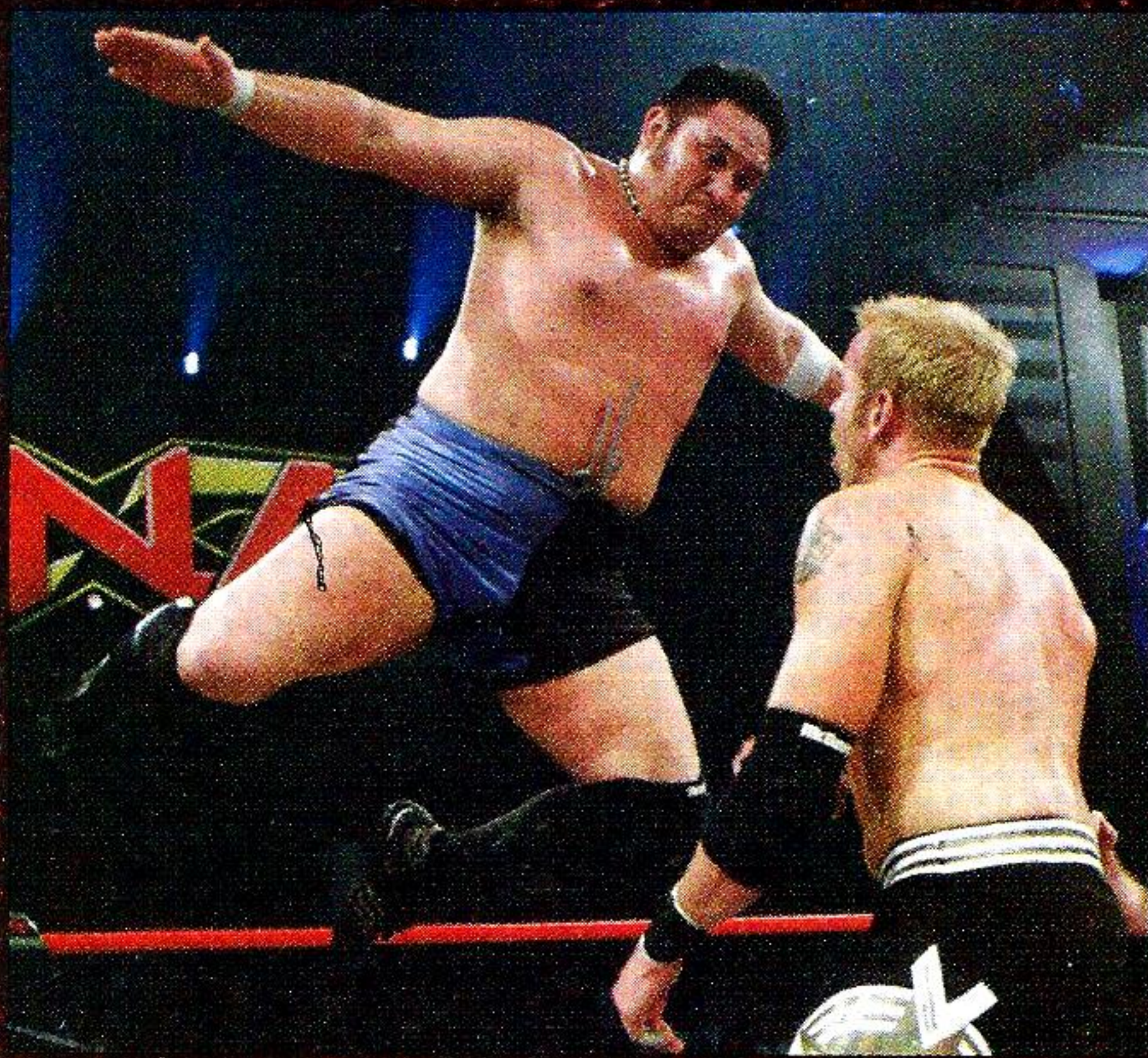
Michaels has always had a reputation for delivering the best match on any given card, and his WrestleMania 23 match against Raw champ John Cena was no exception. "The Heartbreak Kid" has also spent the better part of the past year re-establishing DeGeneration X as one of the pre-eminent factions in WWE history. Feuds with Vince and Shane McMahon, The Big Show, Edge, and Randy Orton in 2006 helped WWE officials realize that Michaels still had the potential to headline a card.

So, despite all of the momentum Michaels felt he lost with his pinfall loss to Hulk Hogan two years ago at SummerSlam, he remains one of the most consistent headliners in WWE. And not many are expecting that to change anytime soon.

Samoa Joe

"The Samoan Submission Machine" has had a hallmark year in TNA, coming out on top of exchanges with Jeff Jarrett, Scott Steiner, Kurt Angle, and Rhino, among many others. Even though Joe has, to date, failed to capture the NWA World title, he still continues to show each week what many Ring of Honor fans have known for years: Samoa Joe has the potential to be wrestling's next big breakout star.

Considering his 6', 280-pound frame, the two-time X division champion is incredibly agile in the ring. In fact, as a former judo champion, Joe is perhaps the only wrestler on TNA's roster that has a toughness about him comparable to that of Kurt Angle. Joe's kokina clutch submission hold is generally not broken, and—once applied—usually leads to victory. And, at Turning Point 2006, Samoa Joe even picked up a submission victory over Olympic gold medalist-



With a distinct size advantage and impressive agility, Samoa Joe is a major threat to NWA World Champion Christian Cage. Cage unfairly defeated Joe to retain his title at TNA's Destination X pay-per-view, but Joe will not be denied for long.

turned-friend Angle.

In recent months, Samoa Joe has grown increasingly frustrated by his lack of title opportunities in TNA. In 2006, Joe stole Jeff Jarrett's NWA World title belt, saying he would return the belt only to the rightful winner of the Bound for Glory main event between Jarrett and Sting. In 2007, Joe should have won the NWA title at Destination X, but was cheated when

champion Christian Cage used the bottom rope for leverage. Many expect it will be only a matter of time before Samoa Joe wins the belt.

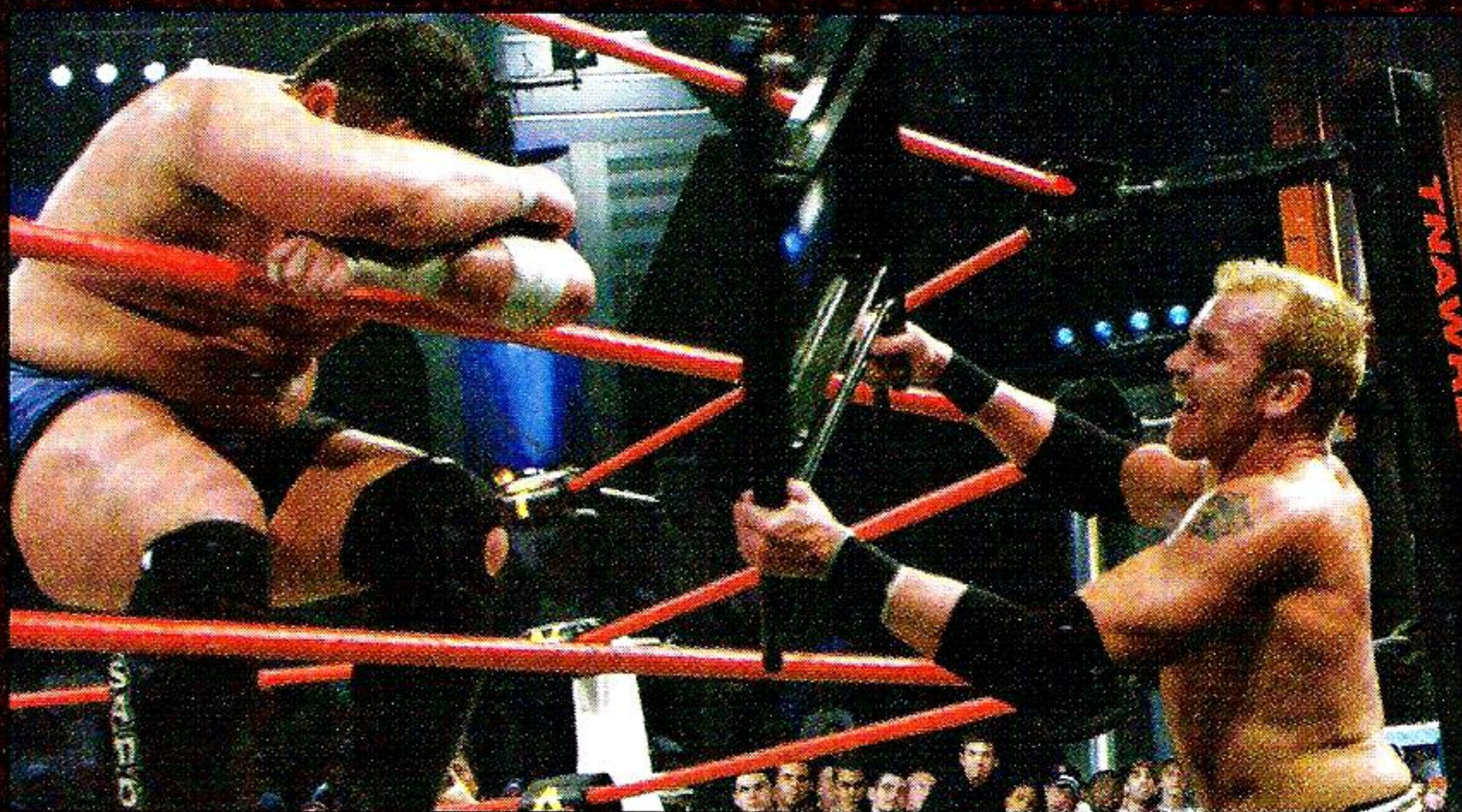
And, considering the dominance he has displayed against each of the opponents, this could possibly happen by the time this issue reaches your hands.

Christian Cage

When Christian Cage competed in WWE without a last name, his smallish frame seemingly prevented him from making any strides toward winning either the Raw or Smackdown World titles. Since his arrival in TNA in late-2005, Cage has collected two NWA championships and is poised to remain a top star in the promotion for some time to come. Do Cage's title victories indicate that he was truly overlooked by WWE? Or is he being pushed in TNA simply because he is a former WWE star?

Cage has established himself as a genuine utility player who can fill the role of champion or a contender in an opening match. A former fan favorite, Cage has been reveling in his rulebreaking ways as of late. Once regarded as the golden boy who ended Jeff Jarrett's despotic reign as champion, Cage is now regarded as a coward and a liar, incapable of holding on to a championship without cheating or without interference from allies such as Travis Tomko and Scott Steiner.

"Captain Charisma" has shown that he is capable of helping carry a promotion as its headliner despite his lack of size. Cage has defended his championship against nearly all of TNA's top competitors, including Jarrett, Kurt Angle, Samoa Joe, Sting, and Rhino. And he always leaves people chuckling and craving more. In fact, Cage has grown up before our eyes in the past year. He is no longer dependent on tag team partners or problem-solvers to win the big match. But when somebody does come out to lend

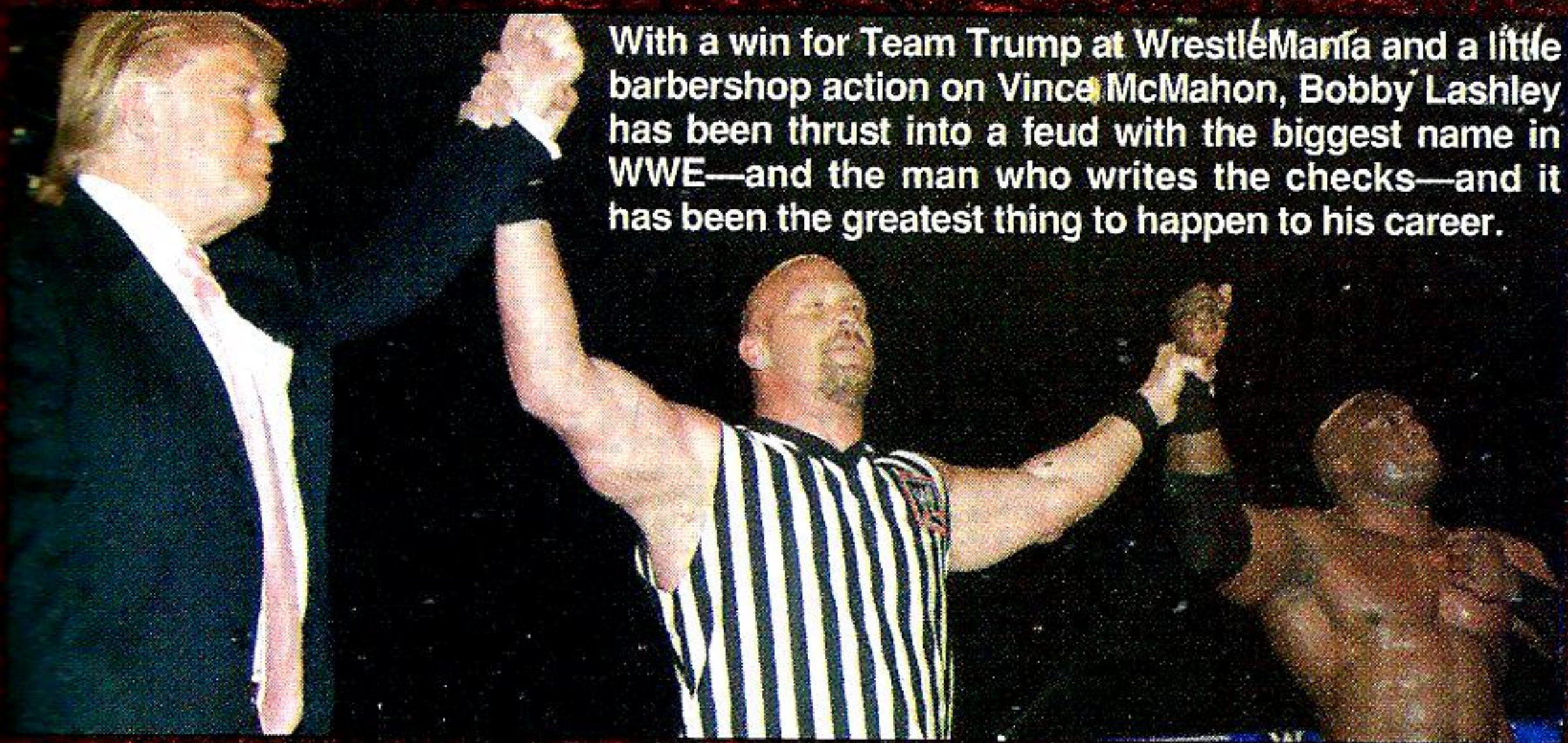


Once Jeff Jarrett's most adamant rival, Cage has become nearly a clone of his former adversary, exercising devious tactics and using outside interference to keep his championship.

him a hand, doesn't that make him even more entertaining?

Bobby Lashley

Late last year, WWE faced a number of dilemmas regarding the revamped ECW. Is there a future in the brand as a niche, edgy wrestling program? Is it financially responsible to continue operating ECW using a small house show model and taping one hour of live programming each week following Smackdown? Who will replace champion The Big Show upon his retirement?



With a win for Team Trump at WrestleMania and a little barbershop action on Vince McMahon, Bobby Lashley has been thrust into a feud with the biggest name in WWE—and the man who writes the checks—and it has been the greatest thing to happen to his career.

Could it really be Rob Van Dam, who many felt let the company down with his 2006 arrest?

WWE, of course, opted to shift budding mid-card star Bobby Lashley from Smackdown to ECW, putting him on the main-event fast track. Many believed Lashley had the potential to be wrestling's next breakout star anyway, so why not find out what he can do in WWE's newest brand? Since Lashley signed with ECW and immediately won the brand's heavyweight title from The Big Show at December to Dismember inside the "Extreme Elimination Chamber," his matches have been well-received by fans and officials alike. Nevertheless, his promos have been lackluster and some are questioning whether he has the charisma to become a genuine main-eventer on either Raw or Smackdown. Most recently, Lashley gained plenty of mainstream coverage by helping Donald Trump shave Vince McMahon's head after defeating Umaga at WrestleMania 23.

During an early-2007 Raw, McMahon compared the ECW champion to Raw champ John Cena and then-Smackdown champ Batista, stating that Lashley was quite possibly the best of the company's three champions. Whether Lashley will ever be regarded as the best champion in WWE remains to be seen. What is known is that he has as good a shot as any.

Edge

This Toronto native is now a two-time Raw World champion, and, with new partner Randy Orton, added yet another tag team title to his resume in 2006. In the past 12 months, Edge has been engaged in high-profile on-again, off-again feuds with John Cena and DeGeneration X members Shawn Michaels and Triple-H. And even though Edge has not come out on top of every match, his win-loss record is comparable to those of Michaels or Helmsley.

Aside from his live sex celebration, Edge also gained a lot of recognition for bringing the Raw World title back to Raw by defeating joint ECW/Raw champ Rob Van Dam in July 2006. Edge would go on to hold this championship for nearly three months before losing to Cena in a TLC match at Unforgiven.

Then there is the issue of Edge's undefeated WrestleMania record. That record remained intact until Jeff Hardy came off with a crazy legdrop that nearly broke Edge and the metal ladder underneath him in WrestleMania



Jeff Hardy broke the ladder and Edge during the MITB ladder match at WrestleMania, but it was Edge's WrestleMania undefeated streak, which was also broken that night, that hurt the most for the "Rated R Superstar."

23's "Money In The Bank" ladder match. After being knocked out and carried out on a stretcher, Edge awoke to find out that his WrestleMania record had become 7-1. This realization was probably more painful for him to accept than his failure to grab the MITB briefcase. Edge was very proud of the streak and continually gloated about it.

Edge's future is uncertain, although a feud with former Rated RKO partner Randy Orton seems imminent. Whatever the case may be, Edge remains one of the most likely wrestlers to take away Cena's spiny belt. After all, Edge is the only wrestler on the Raw roster to have done this once before.

Sting

He is not just Steve Borden anymore. In fact, a slightly repackaged Sting has spent the better part of the past year either beating on Jeff Jarrett or showing Abyss there is much more to life than torture.

After walking away from TNA for a few weeks late last summer, Sting returned with a touch of new red face-paint to complement his white makeup and won the NWA World title from Jarrett at Bound for Glory. The match was particularly significant for TNA fans who, for more than a year, regularly pleaded with Jarrett to "drop the belt." And, of course, the title win was much sweeter because Jarrett decided to spend a lot more time backstage.

Unfortunately, Sting's reign as champion in TNA lasted only one month because, in a controversial decision, Abyss was awarded the title via disqualification at Genesis. The match brought out a violent



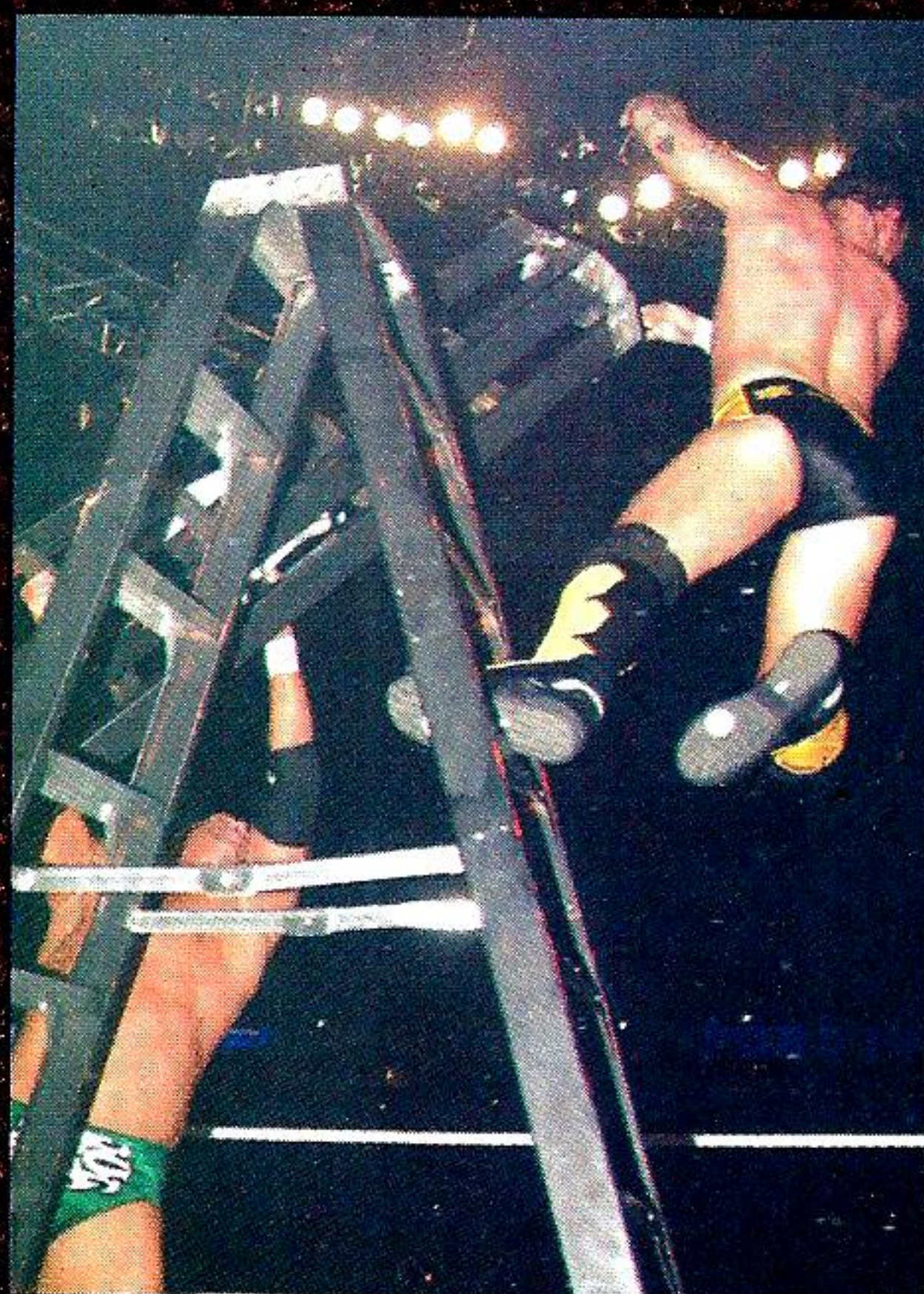
According to Sting, all Abyss needs is a little TLC—tender, loving care, that is. Sting has devoted his time to convincing Abyss that fury will not diminish the pain of his past. So far, Sting has been unsuccessful in reaching the heart of "The Man-Monster," but, thanks to Sting, the idea has been planted.

While some question whether TNA is correct in promoting a lot of the promotion's big-name veterans at the expense of younger, emerging talent, Sting's presence in TNA brings a lot of former WCW fans over to TNA, just as Angle has done with his former WWE fans.

Ken Kennedy

If WrestleMania 23's "Money In The Bank" ladder match is any indication, WWE officials are placing a lot of hope in Ken Kennedy's ability to headline one of its brands at some point. In that match alone, Kennedy defeated seven of his peers across three brands. He ended Edge's WrestleMania undefeated streak. And he sent away three of the elite wrestlers included in this report. Indeed, WrestleMania may represent the turning point in Kennedy's career.

Kennedy has already captured a U.S. title and challenged for Smackdown World gold already, and it is believed he is one of the few performers on the



Smackdown roster to offer a solid blend of athleticism, charisma, and high-impact wrestling ability.

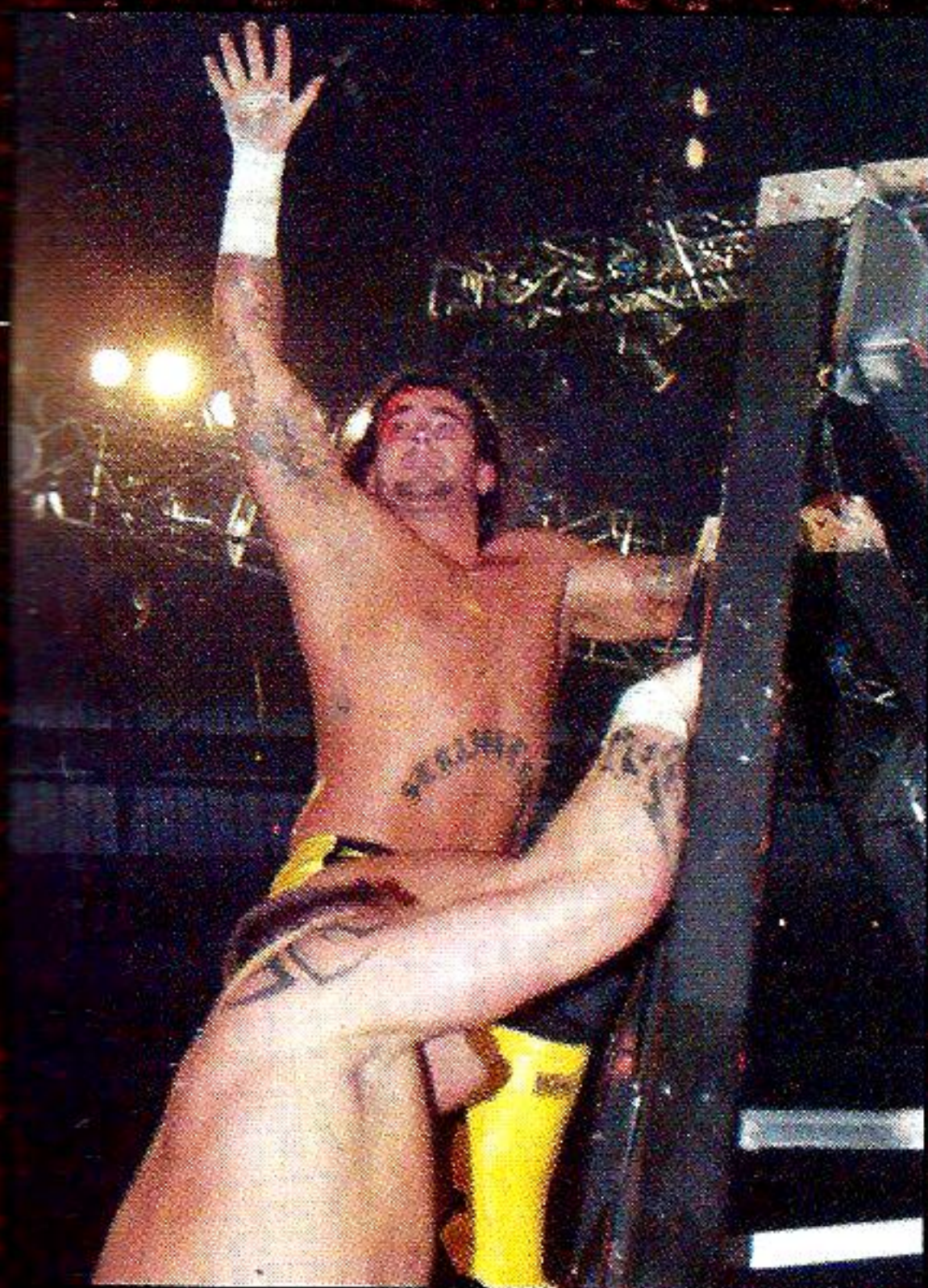
Of course, announcers Michael Cole and John Bradshaw Layfield regularly remind Smackdown viewers that Kennedy has defeated seven former world champions in his brief yet distinguished WWE career.

Although some of these are disqualification wins, it still lends a sense of legitimacy to the claim that Kennedy will continue to excel as a key figure on whichever brand he chooses to cash in his "Money In The Bank" briefcase.

C.M. Punk

If C.M. Punk feels at home in WWE's version of ECW, how much more at home would he have been in the previous version that catered to only the most hardcore of fans? C.M. Punk's emergence as a star is significant considering WWE's powers-that-be didn't expect him to make much of a name for himself.

Citing his lack of size and unsure how his straight-laced personality would play with WWE fans, company officials were at first reluctant to sign the man Ring of Honor's faithful swore by. In his brief time in ECW, Punk has established himself without necessarily having any significant, big-name opponents against which to face off and draw comparison. He first gained attention from Raw and Smackdown fans at Survivor Series when he helped DeGeneration X and the Hardys clean sweep Rated RKO's team, 5-0. During this match, Philadelphia gave a loud and resounding chant to express their admiration of Punk. Even more amazingly, the ECW star was also sharing the ring with Triple-H, Shawn Michaels, and the



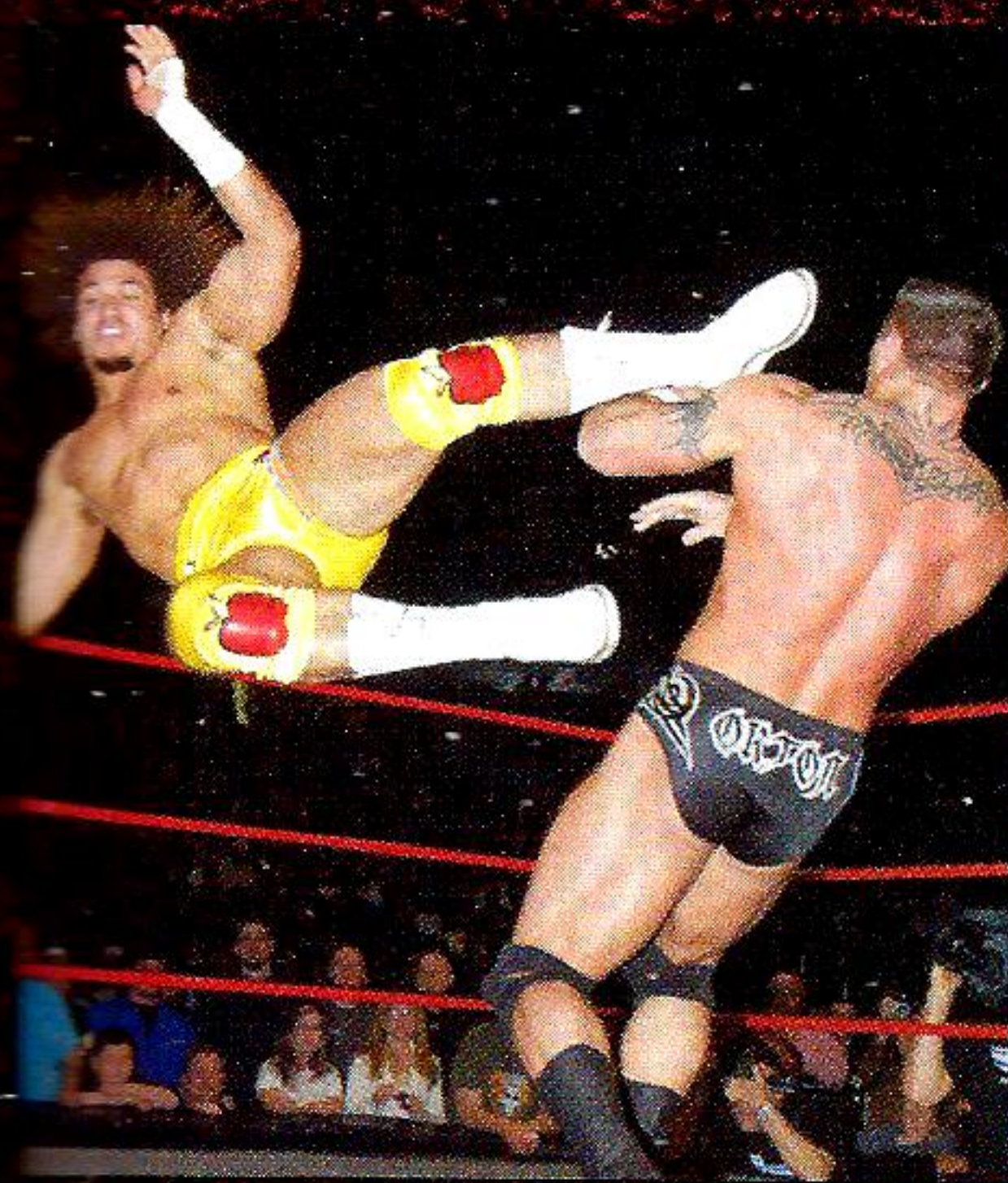
Just inches away from scoring the "Money in The Bank" title shot, Orton took down Punk in the WM23 ladder match. Punk keeps coming up short in various title chases, but the fans still cheer the name of the former Ring of Honor star.

Lashley would be very intriguing, but it remains to be seen whether WWE higher-ups will be bold enough to book the match.

Randy Orton

Randy Orton remains one of WWE's elite stars despite losses to Kurt Angle, Hulk Hogan, John Cena, Shawn Michaels, Triple-H, and even Carlito over the past year. Still, Orton remains the youngest world champion in WWE history, an accomplishment that no wrestler has been able to take away from him.

Orton escaped the mid-card bubble when he began teaming with Edge, collecting a Raw World tag title and feuding with DeGeneration X. Orton was Triple-H's in-ring opponent when "The Game" suffered a quadriiceps tear during a match pitting Rated RKO against DX at New Year's Revolution. The third-



After a 60-day suspension for behavioral problems, Randy Orton insisted that he would become a champion again upon his return. But losses to Carlito (pictured against Orton), Hulk Hogan, John Cena, Shawn Michaels, and Triple-H suggest otherwise.

Hardys.

Punk followed this with an appearance in the "Extreme Elimination Chamber" at December to Dismember. And even though Punk was unable to bring home The Big Show's ECW title (and, in fact, was the first competitor eliminated), he is still considered the brand's hottest rising star. A showdown with current ECW champion Bobby

generation star has made quite a comeback since his career bottomed out a year ago when he was suspended for the ever-vague "unprofessional conduct" rationale. As Orton declared in a wwe.com statement at the time, "My conduct was unbecoming of a champion, which is what I will be again when I return."

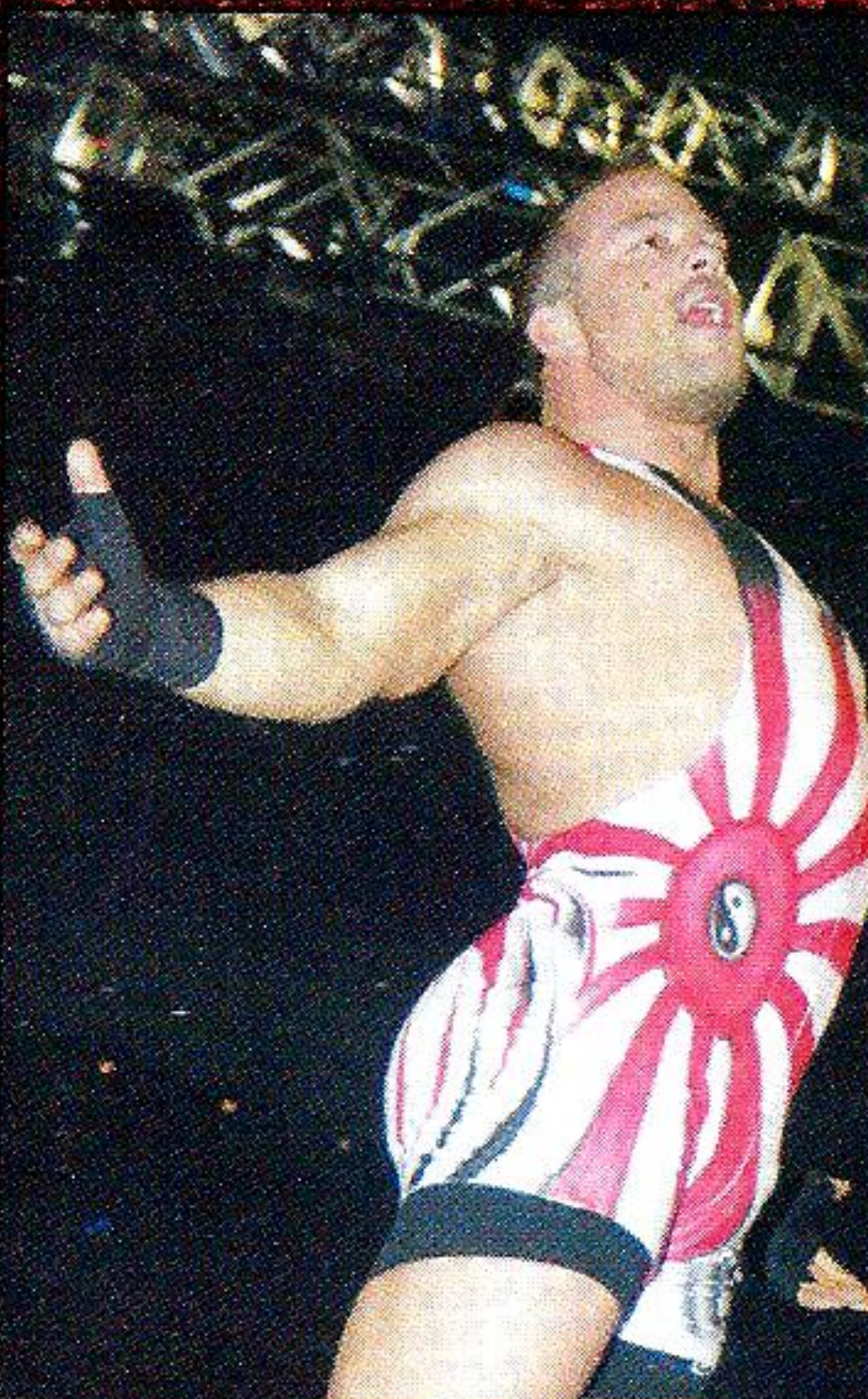
Now that Raw World champion John Cena has vanquished Edge, Umaga, and Shawn Michaels, it's only logical that Orton would be his next challenger. The remaining question is whether Orton has gained the maturity to handle the responsibility—both inside and outside the ring—of being a main-event star.

Rob Van Dam

The state of Rob Van Dam is probably this report's biggest unknown. He is just as likely to win a *PWI* Achievement Award as a "Turnbuckle Turkey."

Fans remember how Van Dam tore into his opponents on Raw with a newfound energy after he returned from an injury in the spring of 2006. Soon thereafter, he jumped to WWE's fledgling ECW brand. Within the span of three days, Van Dam pinned John Cena for the Raw World title at One Night Stand, and Paul Heyman awarded him the ECW heavyweight title.

Unfortunately for Van Dam, his career suffered a major setback three weeks later when he was arrested for drug possession. RVD subsequently served a 30-day suspension for his actions, and, upon returning, has struggled to regain his momentum in the new brand. Although RVD has since challenged ECW champions The Big Show and Bobby Lashley, these shots did not result in more gold for the former "Mr. Monday Night." WWE officials have



RVD has had trouble regaining the momentum he had before his July 2006 arrest. It has been rumored that "Mr. Monday Night" may be considering a jump to TNA.

been very reluctant to make RVD a part of the main-event picture on a regular basis.

As of press time, rumors are swirling that Rob Van Dam will jump to TNA upon the end of his WWE contract in July 2007. Although Van Dam has neither confirmed nor denied the rumors, many cite his friendship with Kurt Angle and overall unhappiness with the new ECW brand as reasons why Rob Van Dam may soon be known as "Mr. Thursday Night." □

State of the BUSI

Pro wrestling has experienced its best financial year since WWE purchased WCW in 2001. Two factors have been at work: WWE's penchant for diversification and TNA's emergence as a major player on Spike TV. What hasn't changed is that WWE remains the supreme money-maker in the business

THE STATE OF the business of professional wrestling is always one of transition. Fortunately, the business has improved as of late. The temptation is to credit the emergence of TNA and the resulting inspiration to WWE to maintain its stranglehold on the business. But it might be a little premature to hail the onset of a new wrestling war. TNA made huge strides during 2006, but it is still not appropriate to mention them on the same level as WWE from a business perspective.

WWE's extremely successful 2006 may be just this simple: The company reached a high point in the creative cycle, its stars are connecting with the fan



TNA's first pay-per-view outside of Orlando, *Bound for Glory* in Detroit, may not have been as significant as *Impact's* move to prime time or the Kurt Angle signing, but it was a major step forward for the five-year-old organization.

NEWS

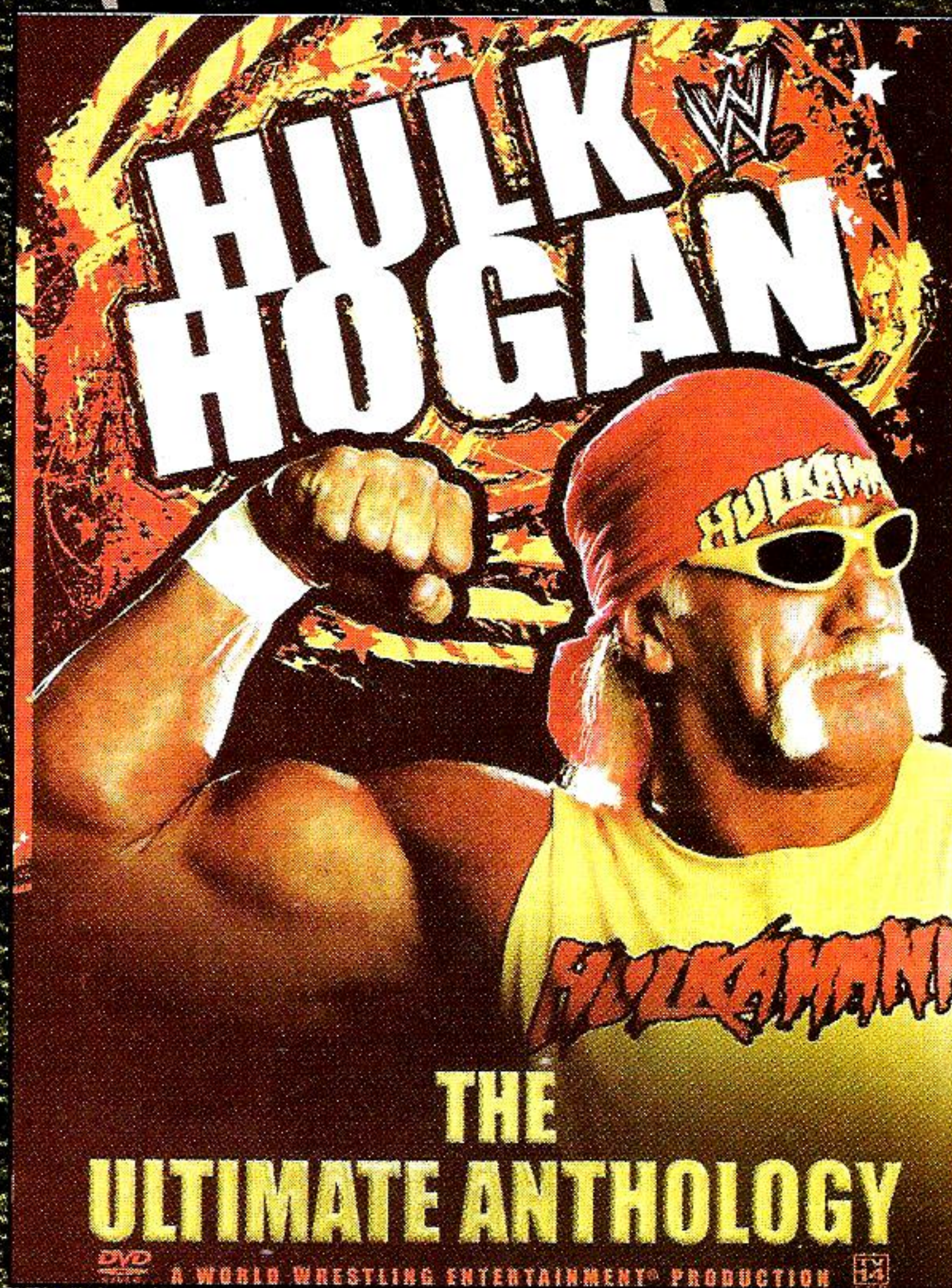
base, and the customers are just digging the product.

WWE enjoyed a substantial jump in overall revenue in 2006. As expected, no figures were released by TNA for the operating year, as it is not required to do so because it is not a publicly traded company. It is widely believed throughout the industry that TNA has yet to turn a profit for its parent company, Panda Ethanol.

From a competition standpoint, wrestling promoters might be more concerned with the mixed martial arts phenomenon, which targets the same demographic. The emergence of UFC has forced those in the wrestling industry to be innovative and work even harder to retain their core fans. WWE and TNA have attempted to reach out to fans through increased media marketing and create more opportunities to see the stars in person. For the first time in its existence, TNA took a pay-per-view on the road in 2006. The promotion's Bound for Glory show, held outside of Detroit, Michigan, drew nearly 3,500 (paying!) fans and gave the company the confidence to do more such shows in the future.

On a larger scale, WWE relied on its usual intensive touring schedule, including 54 international events. There was serious thought being given to establishing WWE satellite promotions with bases around the globe. WWE continued to explore multimedia options through DVD sales, subscription-based mobile phone alerts, and video library assets.

WWE revealed that home entertainment revenue, roughly \$42-million, made up more than 10



DVD sales are creating major revenue for WWE. DVDs made up more than 10 percent of the company's 2006 revenue, equating to roughly \$42-million.

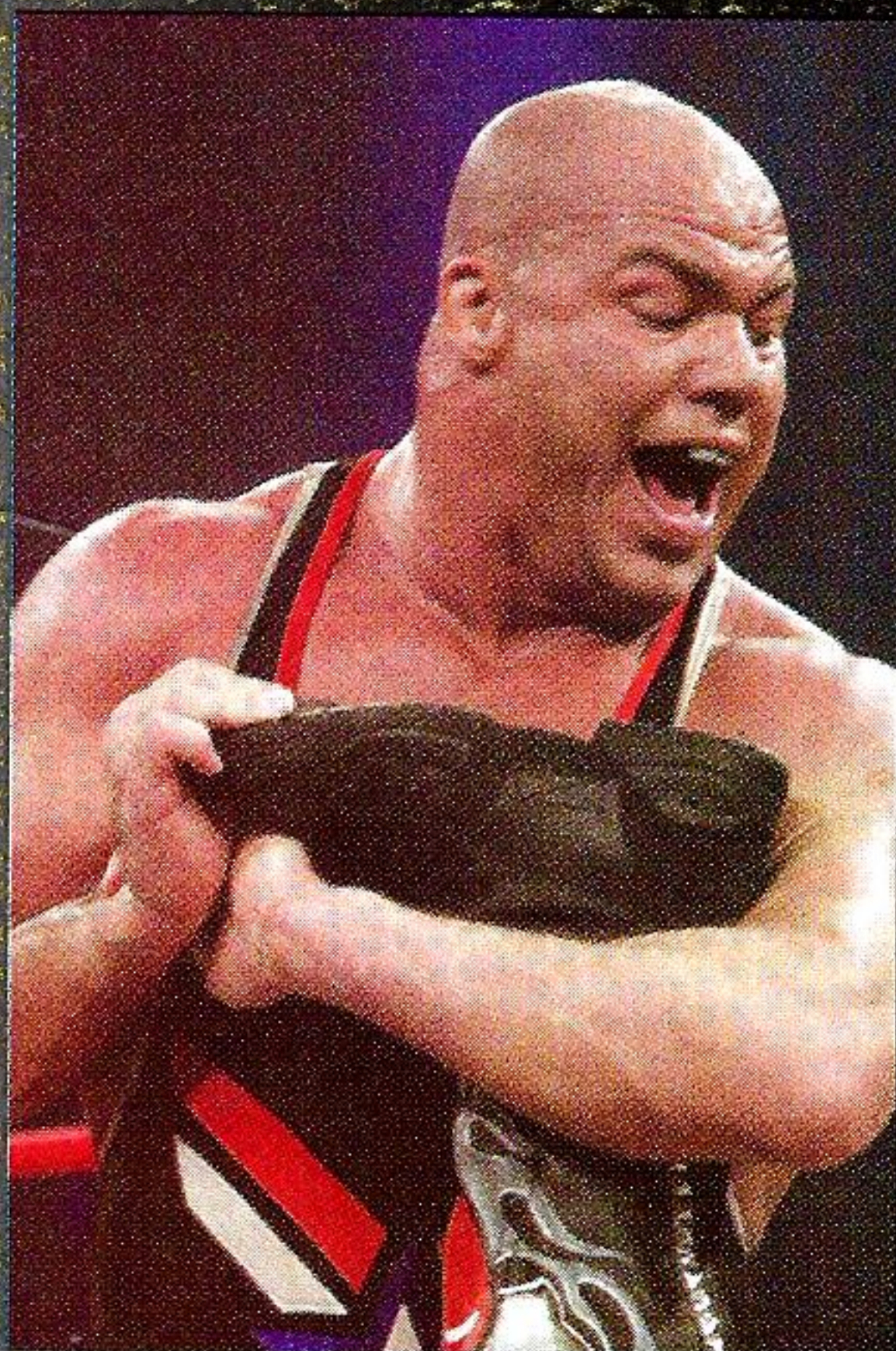
percent of the company's total gross for 2006. According to the company, 10 of WWE's DVD releases were ranked in the number-one slot in the Recreational Sports category at some point during 2006. Although DVD sales held steady for TNA, none would come close to WWE's releases. Add the early estimates of a \$5.3-million gate for



According to WWE, the attendance number at WrestleMania 23 was 80,103, holding the second-place position for the largest crowd in 'Mania history. WrestleMania III, also held in Detroit, holds the top position with 93,173 people in attendance.

WrestleMania 23, and once again the Stamford-based company has proven its dominance in the competition for the sports entertainment dollar.

TNA sought to solidify its place in the business, signing



TNA's biggest coup of the past 12 months came after a number of other notable acquisitions, including Christian Cage and Sting. Kurt Angle's move to TNA outshined all others, igniting hope that it could finally make TNA viable competition for WWE.

such big-name stars as Christian Cage, Kurt Angle, Scott Steiner, and Sting. While pay-per-view buy rates and overall viewership of TNA programming hasn't improved at the rate hoped for, the most important benefit of these high-profile acquisitions is the overall perception they create—that TNA is a major player. TNA has announced to the industry

that it is willing to spend the money and do what it takes to sustain its business plan while providing a fun and entertaining product for the fans and an enjoyable work environment for its talent. Overall, 2007 could be the year that decides where—as a business entity—TNA ultimately heads in the future.

By comparison, WWE continued at the breakneck pace it has set for itself over the past five years. At times, it appeared as if the McMahons were more concerned with developing other avenues of entertainment rather than their core business, pro wrestling. Did this course of expansion hurt the quality of the primary product? Not at all. Ten years ago, that might have been the case, but WWE has become such a large entity, with such highly qualified executives (and not just those named McMahon) in each department, that it has

been able to diversify its various organizational interests without negatively impacting any one.

Both WWE and TNA altered their television schedules slightly in hopes of attracting more viewers as well as grabbing a larger portion of the marketplace. TNA made the expected move of switching *Impact* from the Saturday night 11 p.m. Eastern time slot to a higher-profile Thursday night 9 p.m. spot. The move immediately paid off as *Impact*'s average ratings consistently hit the 1.0 mark—a rarity during the Saturday night era.

While Smackdown saw an increase in viewership following a recommitment by the newly created CW Network, WWE's much more highly trumpeted revival of the ECW brand and the *Saturday Night's Main Event* specials both failed to reach the lofty heights the company had expected. In fact, the future of *SNME* is very much in doubt.

But it wasn't just the small screen that interested WWE. The media conglomerate set its sights on major motion pictures, releasing two in 2006 and completing production on a third. The two major releases—Kane's *See No Evil* and John Cena's *The Marine*—grossed a combined \$35.6-million in worldwide release and an additional \$40.5-million in DVD and home rentals through early-2007.

With the success of both films and the release

W Saturday Night's

MAIN EVENT

While Smackdown has risen in viewership and is less often referred to as the "B" brand, other recent WWE ventures have not fared so well. WWE has dropped ECW house shows due to lack of fan interest, and it appears unlikely that another *Saturday Night's Main Event* special will air anytime soon after the show's poor ratings last year.

of "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin's *The Condemned*, it appears that the market for professional wrestlers as movie stars has come a long way since Hulk Hogan's *Mr. Nanny*.

These also have been good times to be a WWE shareholder. WWE's stock price rose over two full points by the end of fiscal year 2006. This could be attributed to many different aspects of company growth and vindicates the media empire's diversification goals.

On the independent wrestling front, no leader has truly emerged from a business standpoint to grab a larger share of that market. While name recognition has attracted many top indy wrestlers to promotions such as Pro Wrestling Guerilla on the West Coast and Ring of Honor on the East Coast, neither has become a powerful business entity. DVD sales and gate receipts still make up the bulk of the independent promotions' revenues as none have yet to secure a mainstream television deal. And, considering how Wrestling Society X failed on MTV, none seem forthcoming for the time being.

As far as the industry was concerned in 2006, there would be no professional wrestling business—at least to the extent that it

exists today—without WWE. As painful as it may be for some to read, the conclusion is clear: Until someone is willing to compete with Vince McMahon dollar-for-dollar and venture-for-venture, WWE will remain the gold-standard business model in professional wrestling. TNA has made some strides, and the top independents seem more focused on improving the quality of their in-ring product than competing in the business arena, leaving WWE to control the flow of commerce for the foreseeable future. □



After the success of *See No Evil* and *The Marine*, which brought in a combined \$35.6-million for WWE in theaters worldwide and \$40.5-million in DVD and home rentals through early-2007, Steve Austin made his debut as Jack Conrad in *The Condemned* the Friday night before 'Mania 23.

State of THE

For the first time in recent history, WWE does not hold the only key to wrestling's future. With TNA emerging as a viable alternative, the wrestling industry is less likely to become stagnant. Whenever there is a direct challenge to the status quo, innovation becomes the rule of the day

THE GROWING COMPANY has been gradually taking small steps here and there toward closing the gap between itself and WWE. A late-night weekend show on Spike TV was followed by a jump to Thursdays, and, most recently, a regular 9 p.m. time slot. Over time, TNA has complemented its core of budding, once-independent stars of tomorrow with a number of higher-profile athletes. WCW mainstays such as Sting, Scott Steiner, and Kevin Nash have blended with an assortment of WWE exiles, including Christian Cage. But what happened in September 2006 could be seen as the first real shot fired in a potential TNA-WWE war.

TNA signed Kurt Angle. Sure, the circumstances surrounding Angle's release from WWE in August and subsequent TNA arrival at No Surrender were controversial. WWE had let Angle go so he could recoup his personal life in the face of an assortment of personal demons. Yet, here he was, TNA's newest and brightest star taking on more pressure than ever to be the top athlete in a company looking to challenge WWE. It was a sur-



Kurt Angle's move to TNA fired the first shot in what could potentially become the next great television war in wrestling. We all wait in eager anticipation for the next big strategic move.

UTURE



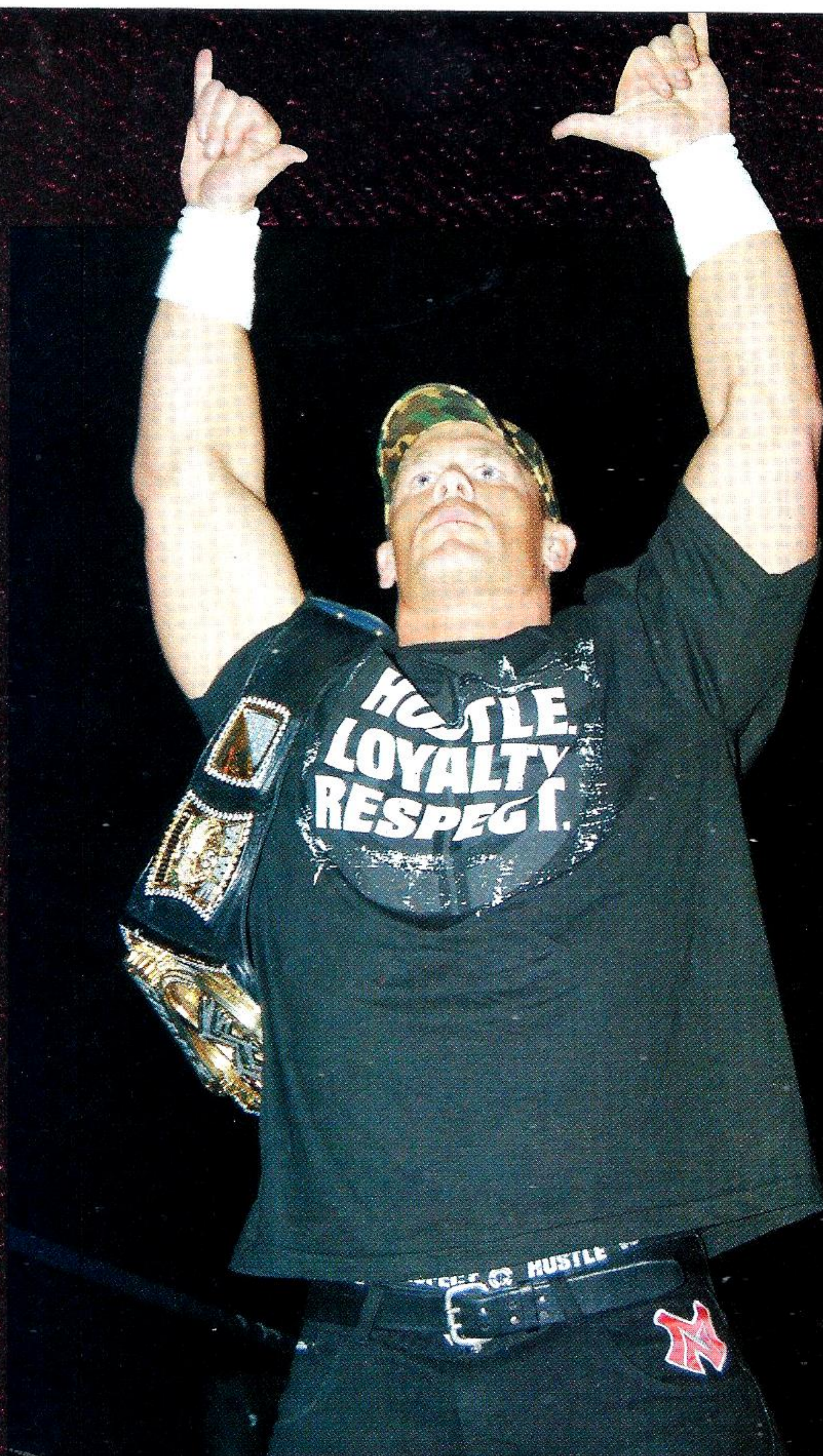
With the most-hyped debut in TNA history came the biggest-name feud for Samoa Joe. TNA turned to "The Samoan Submission Machine" to show the world that its hottest star could go toe-to-toe with a former WWE champion.

real moment—comparable to Hulk Hogan's arrival in WCW or the night Vince McMahon bought his competition.

At present, TNA's other top star is Samoa Joe. Even though Joe has failed to win the NWA World title in his first few attempts, many fans view him as the future face of the company. In fact, according to the 2007 "PW/ Poll," Samoa Joe was voted the one TNA wrestler that WWE should add to its roster. Joe was thrust into a feud with Angle immediately upon the Olympian's debut, and the pair's battles in ensuing months got a lot of people talking about TNA as a future competitor for WWE.

And who knows what is to follow? There is always the possibility of a move to Monday nights, like WCW did 12 years before. While that move would undoubtedly get a lot of TNA fans excited about the future, TNA's ratings have proven it won't be able to go head to head in the near future. Perhaps a two-hour slot is a more reasonable expectation for North America's number-two company.

One problem that does not seem to be improving is both



World title reigns, a starring role in a motion picture, commercial deals with fast food companies: Whether fans like it or not, John Cena is WWE's biggest star, and, as things currently stand, he likely will stay in that position for some time to come.

companies' lack of ability to develop a top star in the mold of Hulk Hogan, Steve Austin, or The Rock. WWE, in particular, has made a number of attempts at pushing some of its stars into main-event spots, with Edge, Rob Van Dam, King Booker, and Rey Mysterio Jr. coming into their own in 2006 and being pushed harder than ever.

It is worth noting that some of the company's biggest stars over the years—notably Hogan, Roddy Piper, Austin, The Rock, and Mick Foley—have been primarily reduced to infrequent, often unadvertised cameos on Raw. This often prevents WWE from capitalizing on the star appeal of some of these big-name wrestlers by having them take

on some of WWE's younger talent. It seems that WWE has missed the opportunity to pass the torch from some of these stars to future headliners.

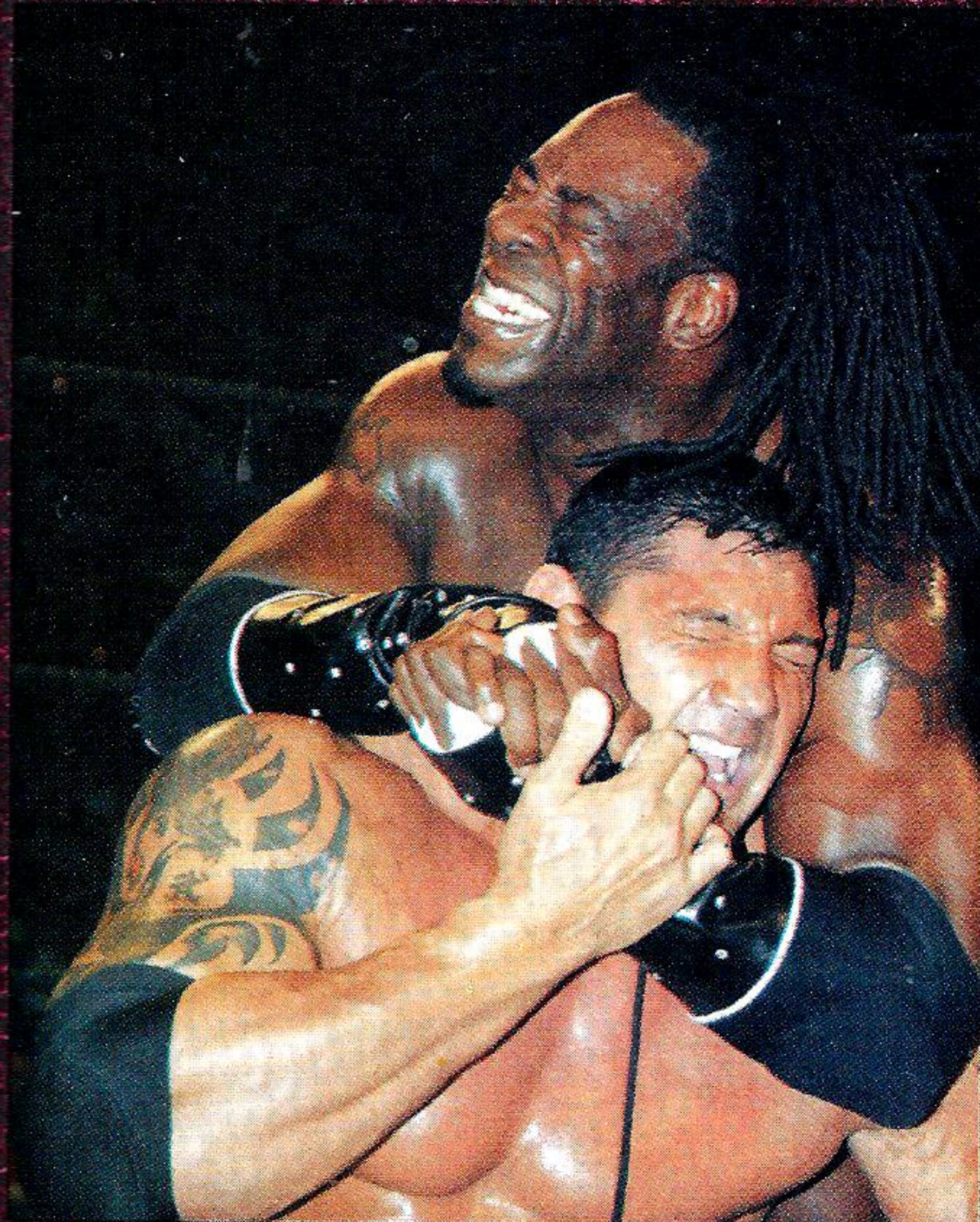
At present, WWE sees its most popular star as John Cena. It was mentioned in last year's "State Of The Future" that Cena is very popular with women and children. He does seem to be gradually winning over a larger portion of the age 18-plus male demographic, which bodes well for his future and validates WWE's commitment to him.

Two other stars that have WWE's solid endorsement are Batista and Bobby Lashley. At age 38, Batista is viewed by many as having peaked in popularity. But, when his music cues, the ovation he receives rivals anything the women and children cheering for Cena can muster. It will be interesting to see what direction his career takes in 2007. Will we see Cena vs. Batista at WrestleMania 24?

Then there is Bobby Lashley. Lashley has emerged as the primary star with the re-introduced ECW brand. Once a mid-carder on Smackdown, the primary knock on Lashley was that, at this stage of his young career, he lacks the oratory skills to connect with fans in a truly special way. The fact that he was relegated to a secondary role in his own WrestleMania match speaks volumes about his current state. But there are countless examples in

this sport of wrestlers' mike skills catching up to their physical skills, so the future of Bobby Lashley can still be very bright.

The June 2006 addition of ECW as a third WWE brand is a significant expansion of a business model that WWE implemented five years ago. At the time of the 2002 brand extension, WWE's hope was that two brands, while not necessarily re-creating the WWF vs. WCW war of five years earlier, would ultimately serve as an additional stream of revenue. The re-branding of ECW would serve two purposes: the creation of yet another source of revenue, and, perhaps as importantly, the creation of an obstacle to TNA's hopes of becoming a profitable company.



Booker T's ascension to the Smackdown World title at Batista's expense was a surprise in 2006. It is becoming obvious that WWE's powers-that-be feel somewhat more comfortable with veterans such as Booker—and now The Undertaker—atop the Smackdown brand.

To some degree, the ECW experiment has been a success. In spite of what many would consider weak Nielsen numbers, they are still far in excess of what TNA has averaged. If fans can learn to accept the fact that this is not the ECW they came to love in the 1990s, there is a very real possibility that the creative minds at WWE can eventually make this experiment work. If not, it might be WWE that has to accept the fact that two brands within one company are enough.

Moving forward, WWE will be relying more heavily on inter-promotional matches. WWE executives recently decided to incorporate performers from all three brands in its PPVs. The move is based on the fact that joint shows—WrestleMania, SummerSlam, Survivor Series, and The Royal Rumble—experience much better buy rates. The hope

within WWE is that it can capitalize on the general popularity of each brand without being forced to consolidate its rosters again.

WWE has toyed with the idea of creating “home base” promotions in various regions around the world. This would be a hugely ambitious—and costly—undertaking. It would require the formation of infrastructures and additional talent and promoters. If this is to take place, we would expect it to be rolled out on a limited basis at first to minimize the downside. If WWE sees that it can achieve a positive return on that initial investment, we could see a major shakeup in the international wrestling scene in the years to come.

An analysis of wrestling's future would not be complete without a look at some of the independent promotions in the U.S. Around this time last year, a lot of publicity and excitement within the industry was generated by the news that MTV would be adding Wrestling Society X to its lineup, using a slew of independent wrestlers and at least two established names, Sean Waltman and Vampiro. Unfortunately, the promotion lasted only a few weeks before the network cancelled it.

The effect of that cancellation will not be felt by the rest of the independent community. The business models of the more successful independents, most notably Ring of Honor, revolve around live gates and the sales of DVD and other merchandise. On a positive note, the brief national exposure of some of the wrestlers who appeared on WSX might increase their value to independent companies and perhaps WWE and TNA as well. □

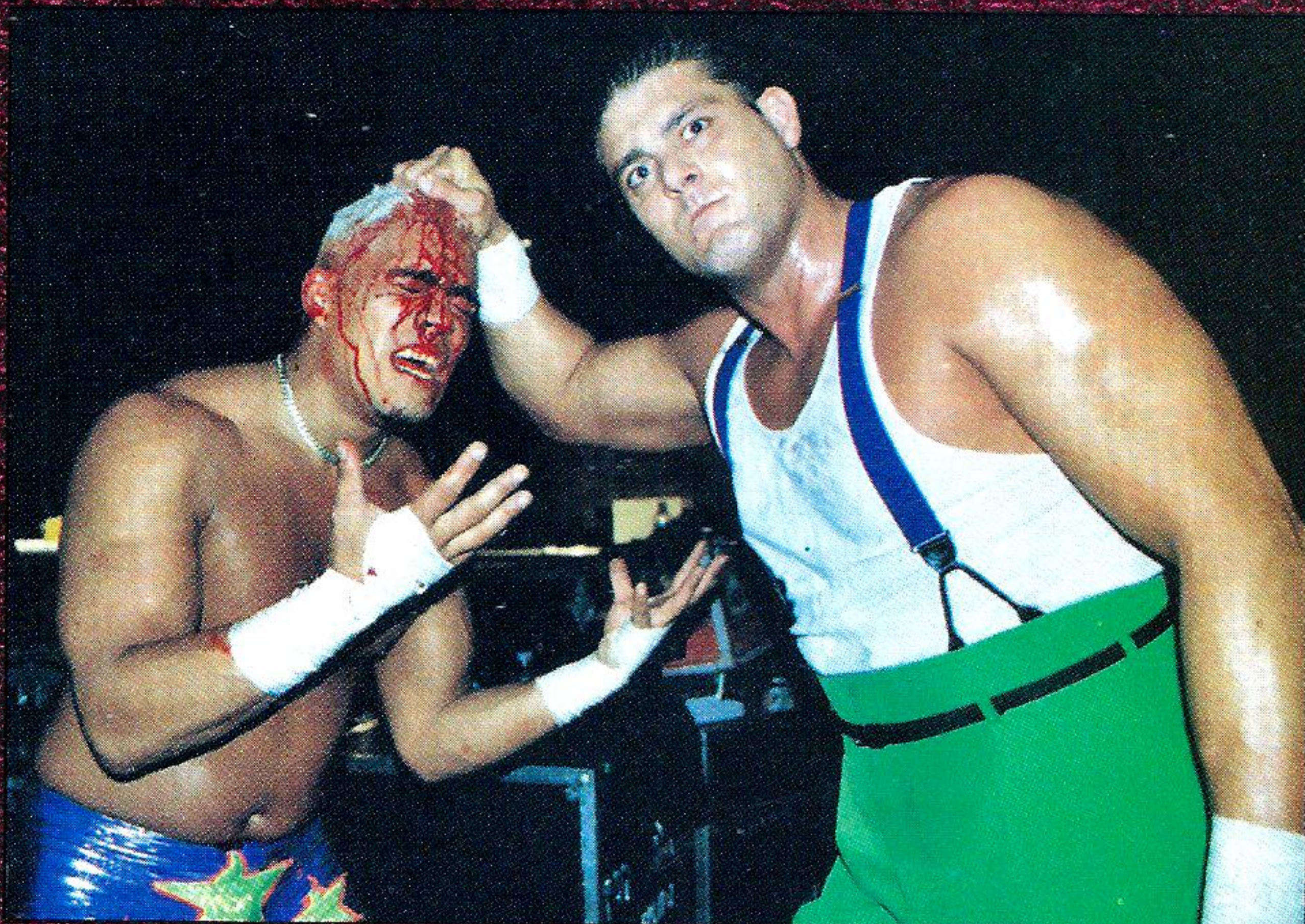


Photo by Mike Lano

The demise of WSX was saddening for its audience and wrestlers—such as Kaos (left) and Jesus Aguilera (right)—but it shouldn't have much of an impact on indy wrestling as a whole.



Photos by George Napolitano

WRESTLEMANIA®

23

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Cena Survives HBK! ⚡ The Dead Man Reigns! ⚡ Kennedy Puts Money In The Bank

By Kevin McElvaney

WWE'S CURRENT SLOGAN, "The Power Is Back," is something of an attempt to reclaim fans who may have drifted away from the product over the years. It makes sense, then, that WrestleMania 23 was given the "All Grown Up" tagline. Fans who 20 years ago watched WrestleMania III (which, no coincidence, also took place in Detroit) were encouraged to tune in and see how WWE has grown over the past two decades.

WrestleMania 23 began with a video package of WWE Superstars who would appear later on the show. We saw a clip of the record-breaking crowd from WrestleMania III, followed by a live shot of those in attendance at Ford Field. Twenty-year-old audio of Vince McMahon boomed over the loudspeaker, introducing the ageless Aretha Franklin. To the delight of the fans, Franklin had returned to Detroit, gospel choir in tow, to once again open the show with "America The Beautiful."

Franklin's performance was the most visible parallel between WrestleMania's III and 23. More astute viewers might have noticed similarities between Kane's unlikely bodyslam of The Great Khali and

the legendary Hogan-Andre slam of 20 years earlier. Also, both of these events featured hair-vs.-hair matches, as well as an appearance from "The Doctor Of Style," Slick. Still, the similarities between the two "Motor City" shows were neither great nor significant. The night of April 1, 2007, did not seem like a throwback to 1987, but more like a glimpse into the future.

WrestleMania is often regarded as the Super Bowl of professional wrestling. But that is only partially accurate. Sure, WrestleMania is the sport's biggest annual event—the single show that guarantees more public attention than any other during the year. Football, however, is a cold weather sport, and wrestlers don't get an off-season. So, essentially, the Super Bowl is the culmination of the NFL's year while WrestleMania simply serves as the high point of WWE's year. A few issues might have come to a head at WrestleMania 23; perhaps one or two were even settled. For the most part, though, our key observations regarding this year's 'Mania are punctuated with question marks rather than exclamation points.

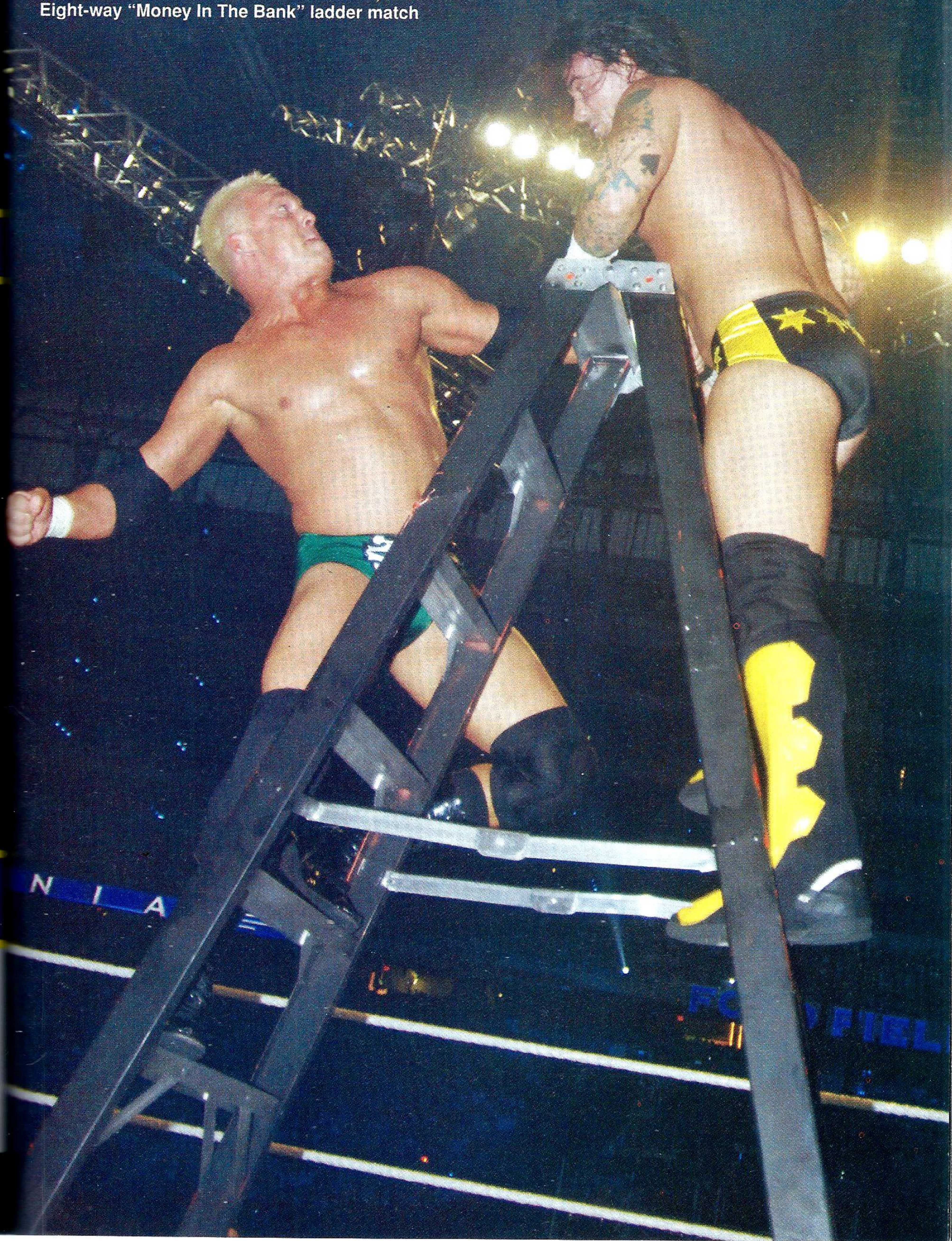
⚡ EIGHT-WAY "MONEY IN THE BANK" LADDER MATCH ⚡

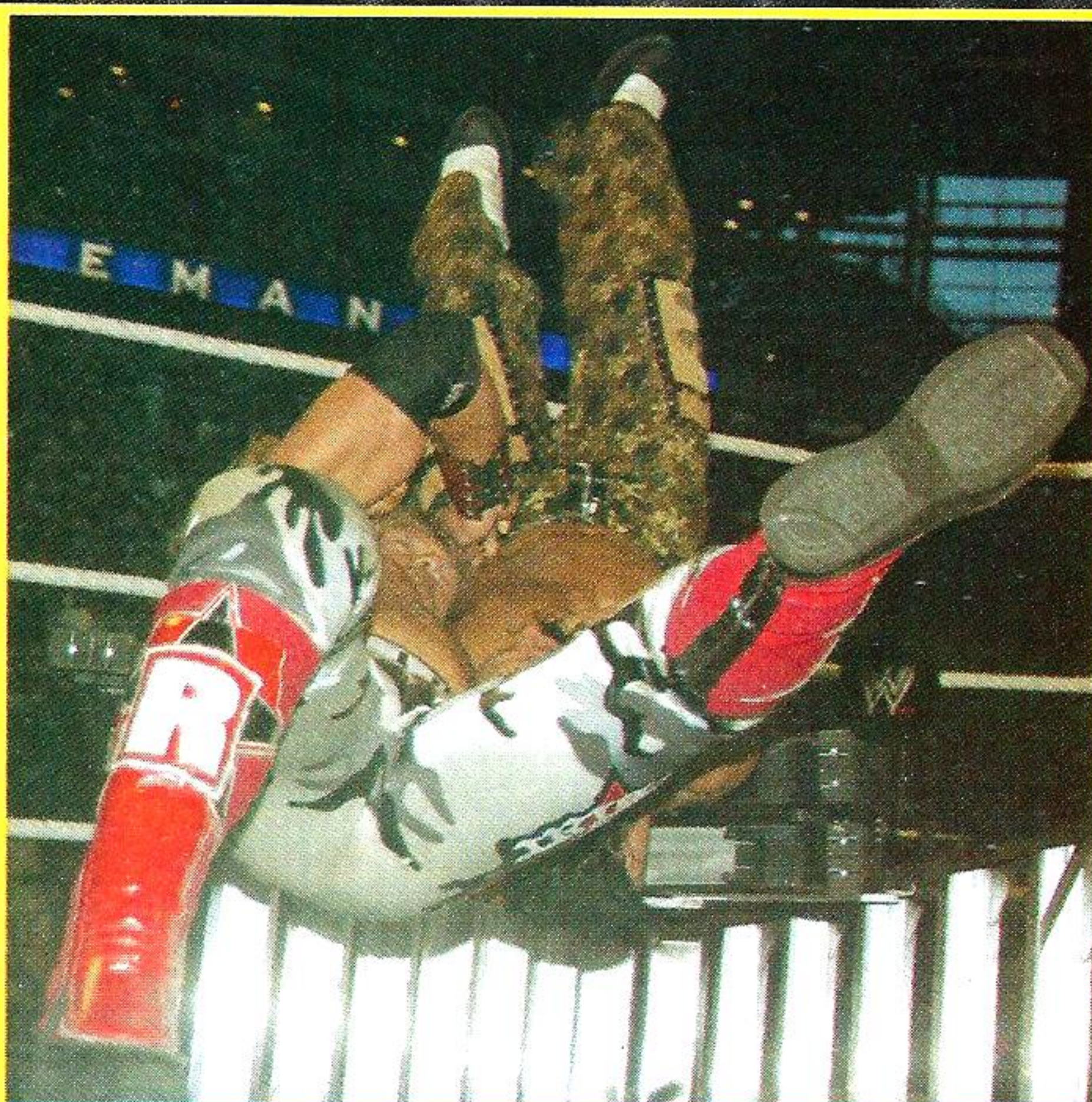
HOW WE GOT HERE: Like the "Money In The Bank" match at last year's event, competitors had to win earlier qualifying matches to be included. Unlike last year, *eight* men were a part of this year's encounter. Four men were from Smackdown, three from Raw, and one from ECW. Edge initially qualified for the match by defeating Rob Van Dam in a singles bout, only to have Vince McMahon revoke his spot. Edge reclaimed his spot by winning a battle royal on Raw.

WHAT WENT DOWN: This match was full of action, with too many highlights to be recorded here. "Money In The Bank" is a term that has become synonymous with high-risk, high-impact wrestling. With a 14-foot legdrop that wowed the 80,000 fans in attendance and millions watching on pay-per-view around the world, Jeff Hardy personified this mindset. This particular move took only about a second, but it instantly eliminated Hardy, Edge, and a broken ladder from the match.

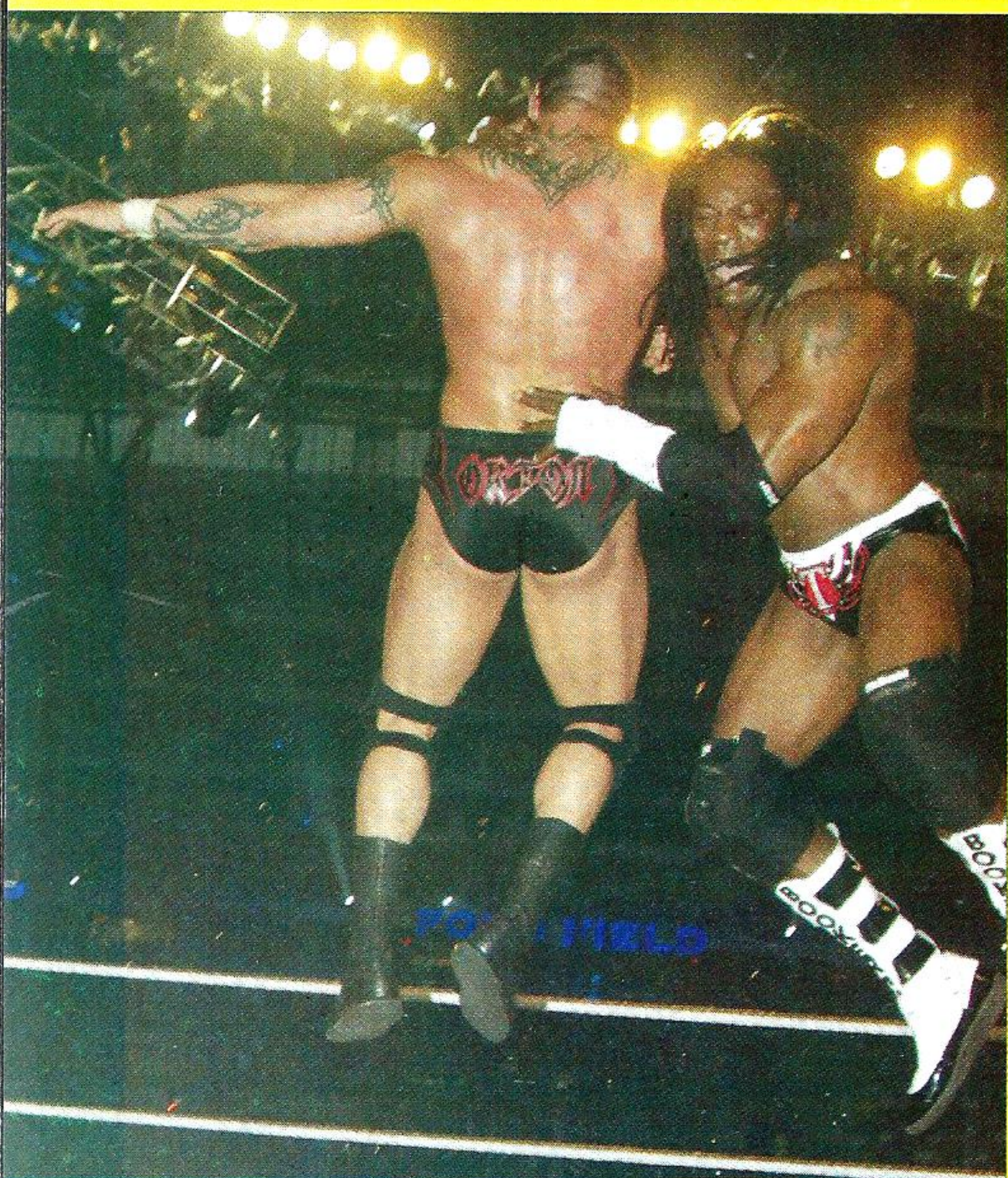
⚡ **STOP THAT PUNK!** ⚡

Eight-way "Money In The Bank" ladder match





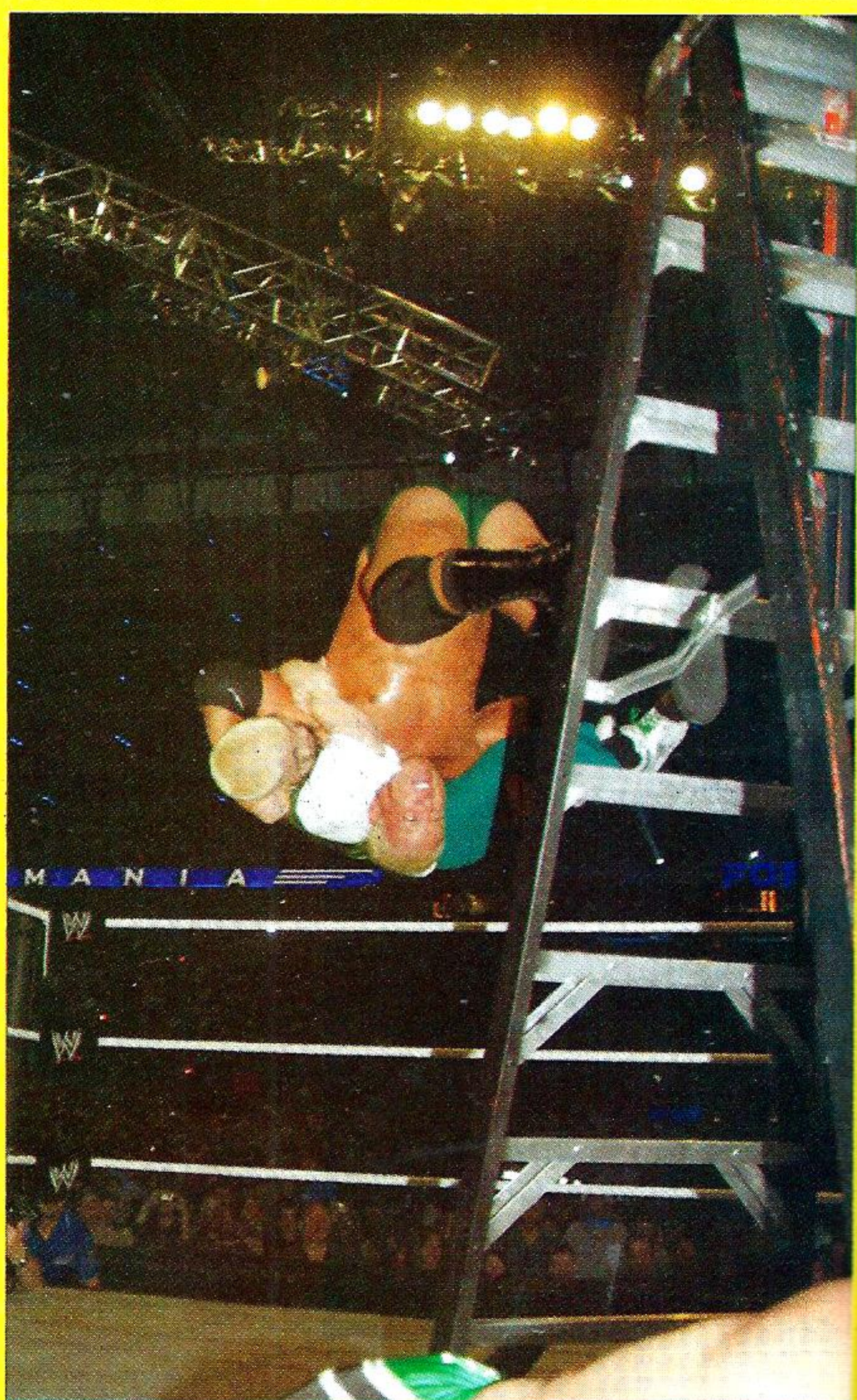
Edge wanted to extend his WrestleMania undefeated streak, but, with seven other men involved in this "Money In The Bank" ladder match, the odds were against him. His old rival, Matt Hardy, felt the brunt of this vertical suplex onto one of the metal ladders.



With the number of participants increasing from six to eight, this year's "Money In The Bank" ladder match seemed like a mini-Royal Rumble! Here, Smackdown clashes with Raw, as King Booker stops Randy Orton with a bookend from the top rope.

Jeff's brother, Matt, also fell victim to a collision with a ladder, via Finlay's Celtic cross slam. Like the previously mentioned legdrop, the Celtic cross incapacitated both men, although Hardy got the brunt of it. Seeing the damage, Finlay's leprechaun friend, Hornswoggle, tried to reach the prized briefcase for him, but was intercepted by Ken Kennedy. Kennedy dove off the ladder, taking the ornery Hornswoggle down with a devastating Ken-ton bomb.

King Booker and Randy Orton also put on strong showings. Both of them managed to hit several of their signature moves. Orton delivered a series of RKOs, including one from a ladder to C.M. Punk, and Booker gave Orton a royal bookend from that same position. Ultimately, though, the match would come down to Kennedy and Punk. The two did battle on a pair of ladders for a short time before Kennedy grabbed the briefcase for the win.



At least Ken Kennedy doesn't discriminate against little people. When Hornswoggle tried to grab the "Money In The Bank" briefcase for himself, Kennedy took him off the ladder via a Ken-ton bomb (above). Finlay had to carry the unlucky leprechaun back to the dressing room (right).

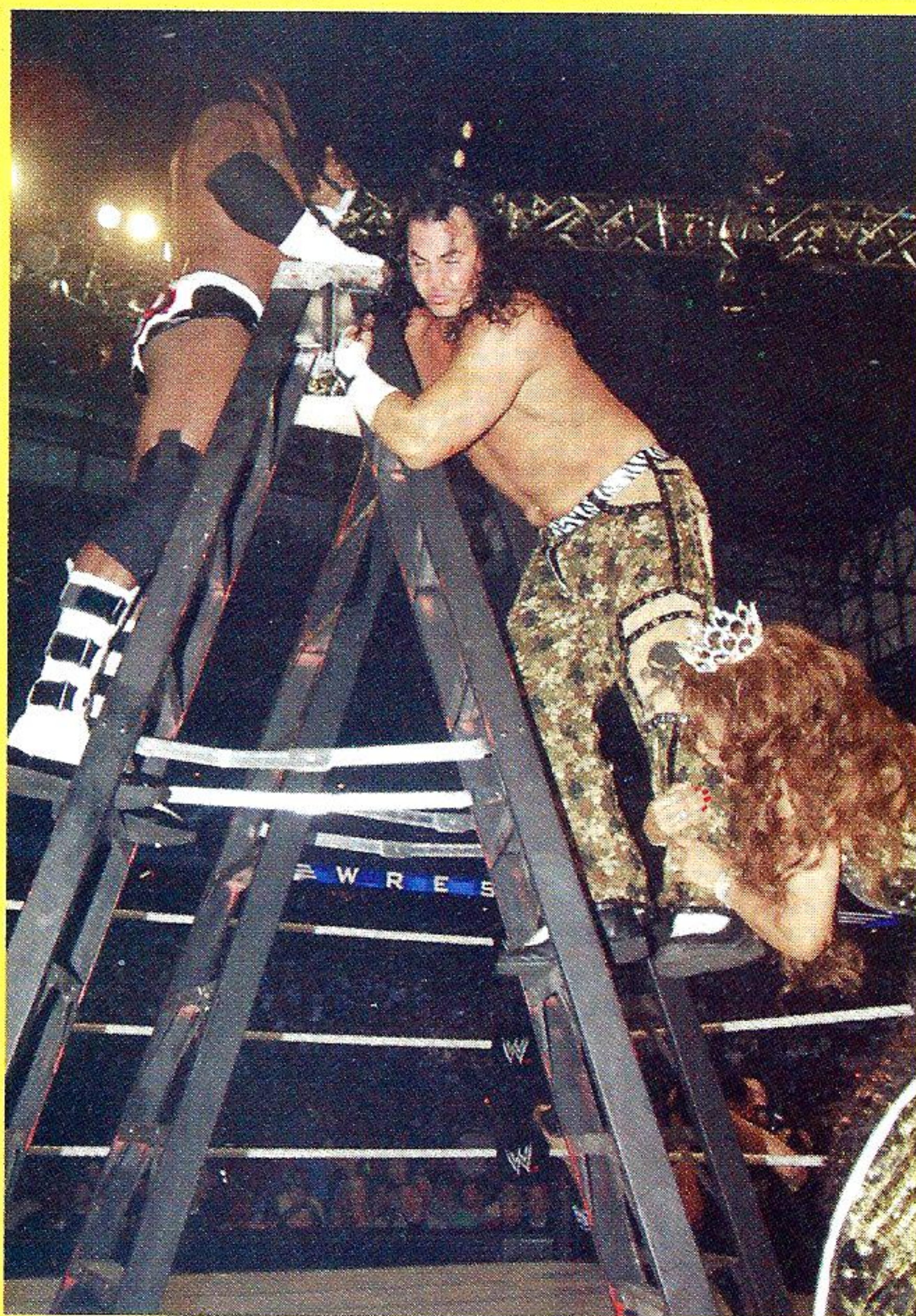
WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE: "Money In The Bank" was a success for the third year in a row. WWE has firmly established the specialty match as part of WrestleMania, and it should continue to be a high point of the event for years to come.

Most of this year's participants, even those who came out on the losing end, benefited from being in the match. Each of them earned at least one well-deserved spot on the highlight reel. Obviously, this victory has great implications for Kennedy and his future on the Smackdown brand. Expect him to cash in his briefcase sometime in the next few months while The Undertaker is the Smackdown World champion. Considering that Kennedy has beaten him before, it's not beyond possibility that he could do it again.

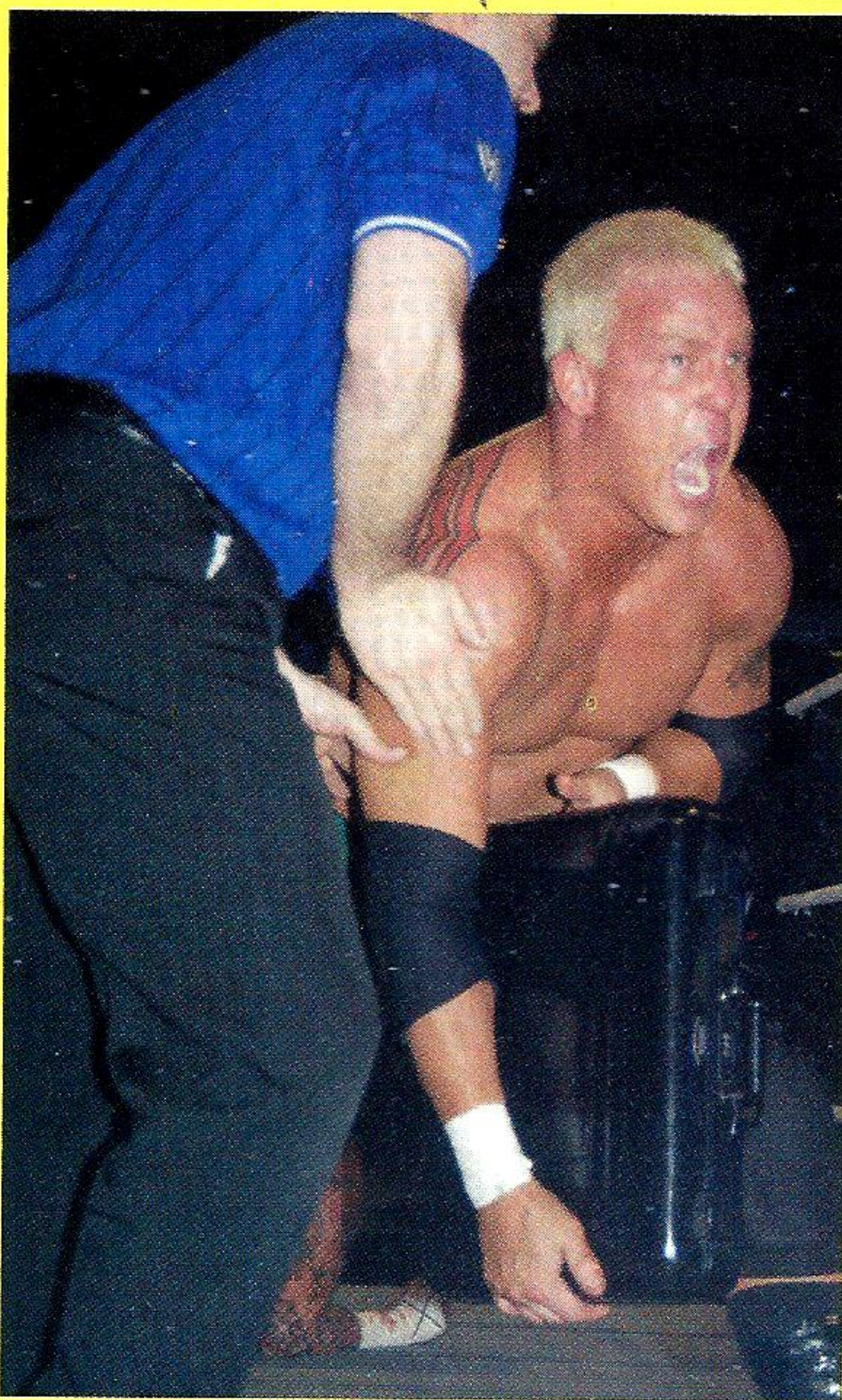
King Booker seems ready for another run as a fan favorite. After the spectacular return of his spinnerooni (a dance move he seldom performs as a rulebreaker) and his willingness to sacrifice a chance at snatching the briefcase to save Sharmell, it seems like the sensible option. The fans would love to see him drop the "King" from his name and be plain ol' Booker T again.

Edge must be frustrated that his 7-0 undefeated streak at WrestleMania has ended. He also probably wishes he could've done more to derail former ally Randy Orton. The lack of interaction between Edge and Orton, given the problems they've had with each other lately, was disappointing. We are left to wonder when the payoff will come for the situation involving Rated RKO.

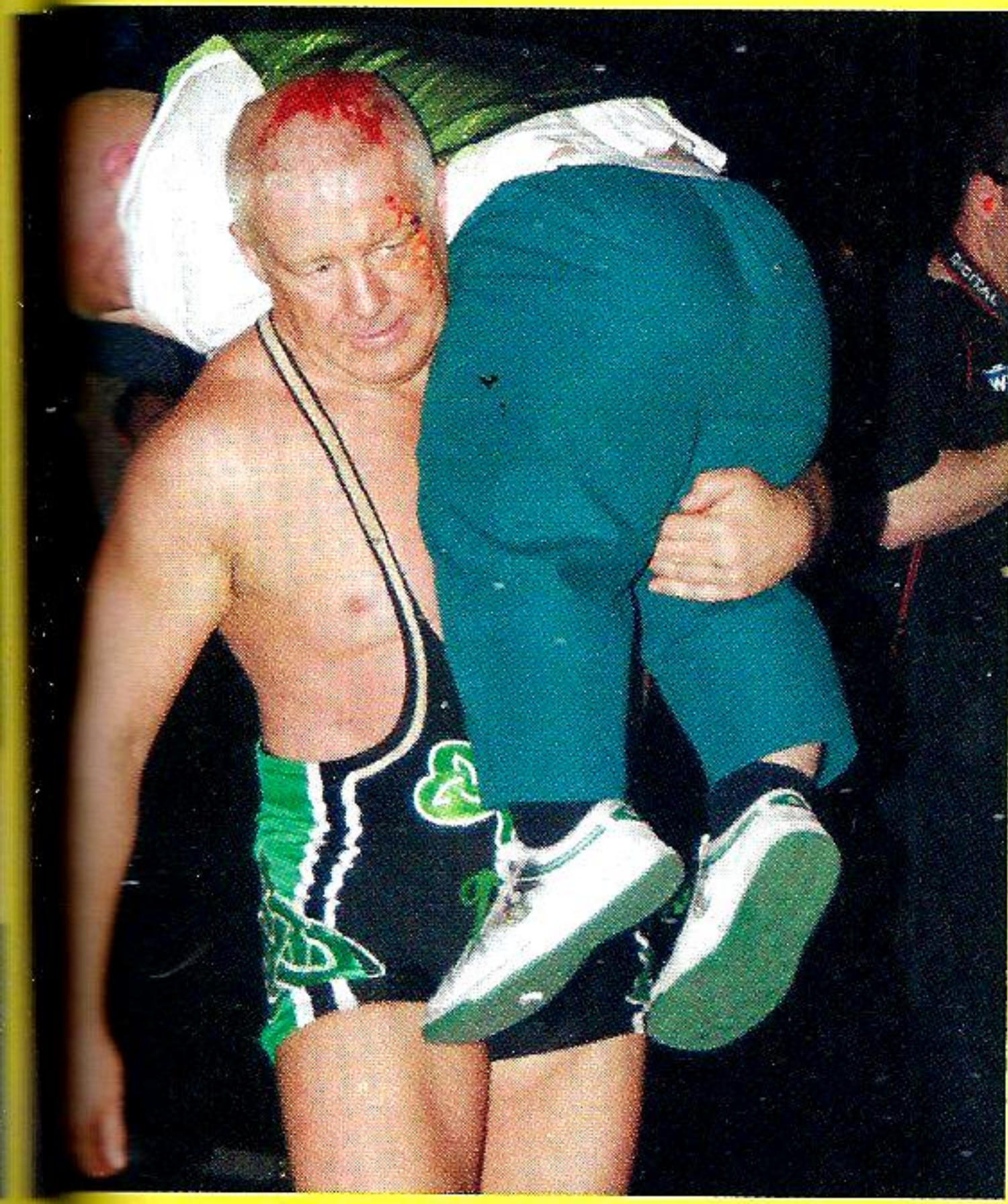
Another notion to be explored in coming months is C.M. Punk's potential. Punk received strong reactions from the crowd throughout the match, particularly when he neared the briefcase. When is WWE going to reward him for his popularity?



Queen Sharmell tried to interfere on behalf of her man by grabbing Matt Hardy's ankle (above). Later, Hardy got even by threatening to drop Sharmell with a twist of fate if King Booker didn't descend the ladder. Ever the chivalrous monarch, King Booker complied.



In typical fashion, Ken Kennedy started bragging immediately about his "Money In The Bank" win. He had a right to do so. For Kennedy, that briefcase symbolized all of his hopes and dreams.



⚡ THE GREAT KHALI vs. KANE ⚡

HOW WE GOT HERE: In a seemingly random attack, Khali appeared on Smackdown, costing Kane his "Money In The Bank" qualifying match. Kane retaliated the following Monday on Raw, which prompted another Khali attack on that Friday's Smackdown. The two traveled around the country, attacking each other at every corner and on both brands. The feud became so vicious that Kane started carrying around the hook he'd used in *See No Evil*.

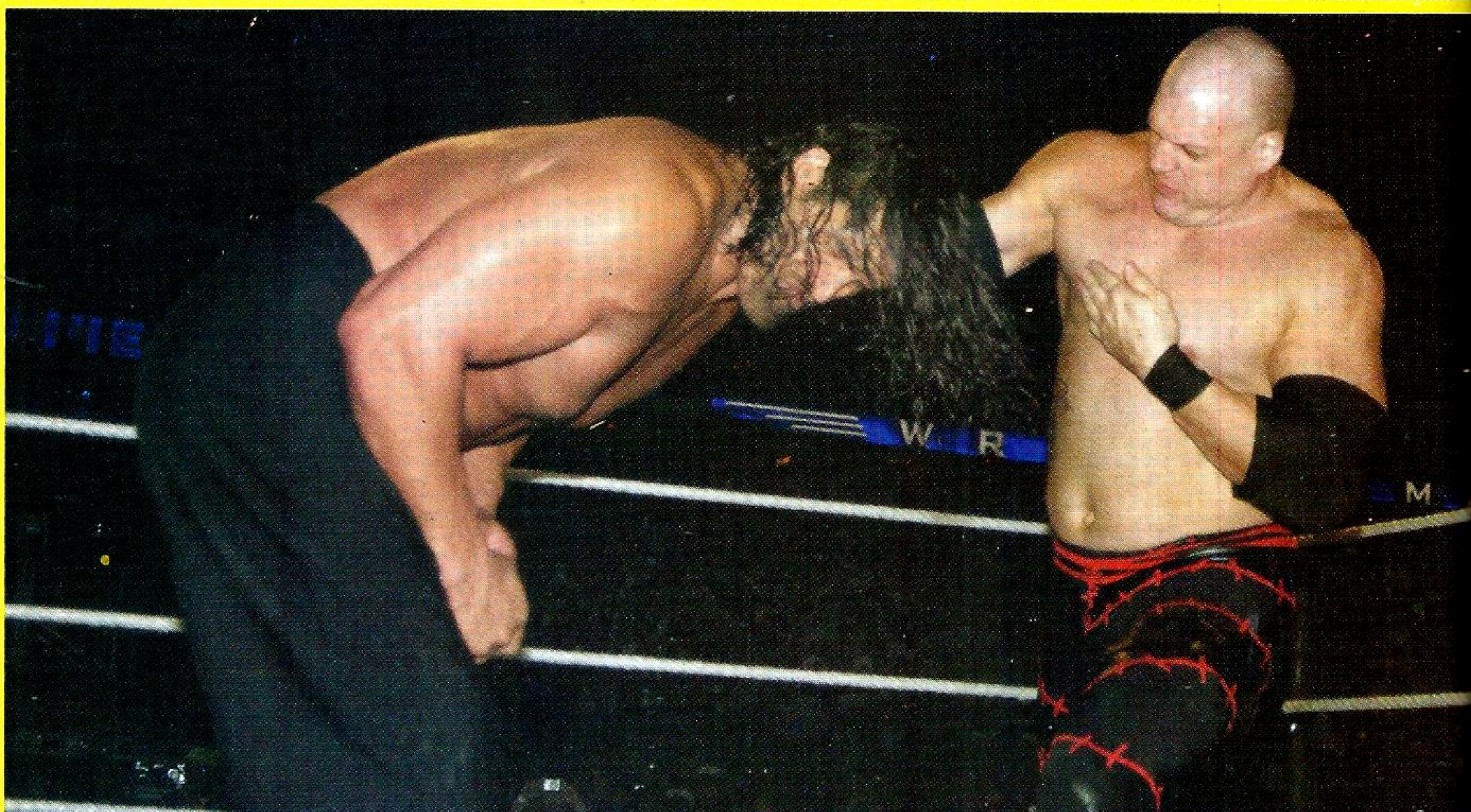
WHAT WENT DOWN: Khali dominated Kane for most of the match, as he had in many of their previous brawls. Kane occasionally countered Khali long enough to land some offense on the Indian giant, but it was not enough to take him off his feet.

Kane left the ring to grab his signature hook. Before anything could become of the situation, Khali delivered some enormous strikes, causing Kane to drop the hook over the middle rope. In desperation (or to pay homage to a hungry George "The Animal" Steele), Khali removed the covering from a nearby turnbuckle, which scattered the protective padding inside. Instinctively, the official turned away to pick up some of the padding. Kane saw an opening. Grabbing the chain attached to his hook, "The Big Red Machine" delivered a huge low blow to the enormous Khali.

With the giant reeling, Kane then did the unthinkable: He bodyslammed the 7', 400-plus-pounder. Kane covered Khali, but the larger man powered out. Both Kane and Khali tried to hit their signature chokeslams, but it was Khali who prevailed, scoring a three-count. After the match, Khali used the hook and chain to choke the breath out of his defeated opponent.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE: WWE has a solid heel in The Great Khali. This is evidenced by how well crowds react when Khali finally gets knocked off his feet. Perhaps if Khali would leave his feet a little bit more, there would be more interest in watching his matches. Crowd reactions tend to be sour and awkward when Khali defeats a well-liked star, such as Jeff Hardy or Rey Mysterio Jr.

Khali immediately established himself as a major force in WWE when he completely dominated then-Smackdown World champion Rey Mysterio Jr. last year. Khali's complete dominance over his opponents thus far, including the relatively smaller Kane, reflects the persistent "bigger is better" philosophy that has plagued WWE for over two decades. Most fans have come to prefer talent over size, which means that Khali may be in for a rough reception as he tries to become a main-eventer.



Kane didn't gain a clear-cut advantage against The Great Khali until after he nailed the giant with a low blow. Despite this barrage of right-hand punches, Kane was unable to keep his momentum going.

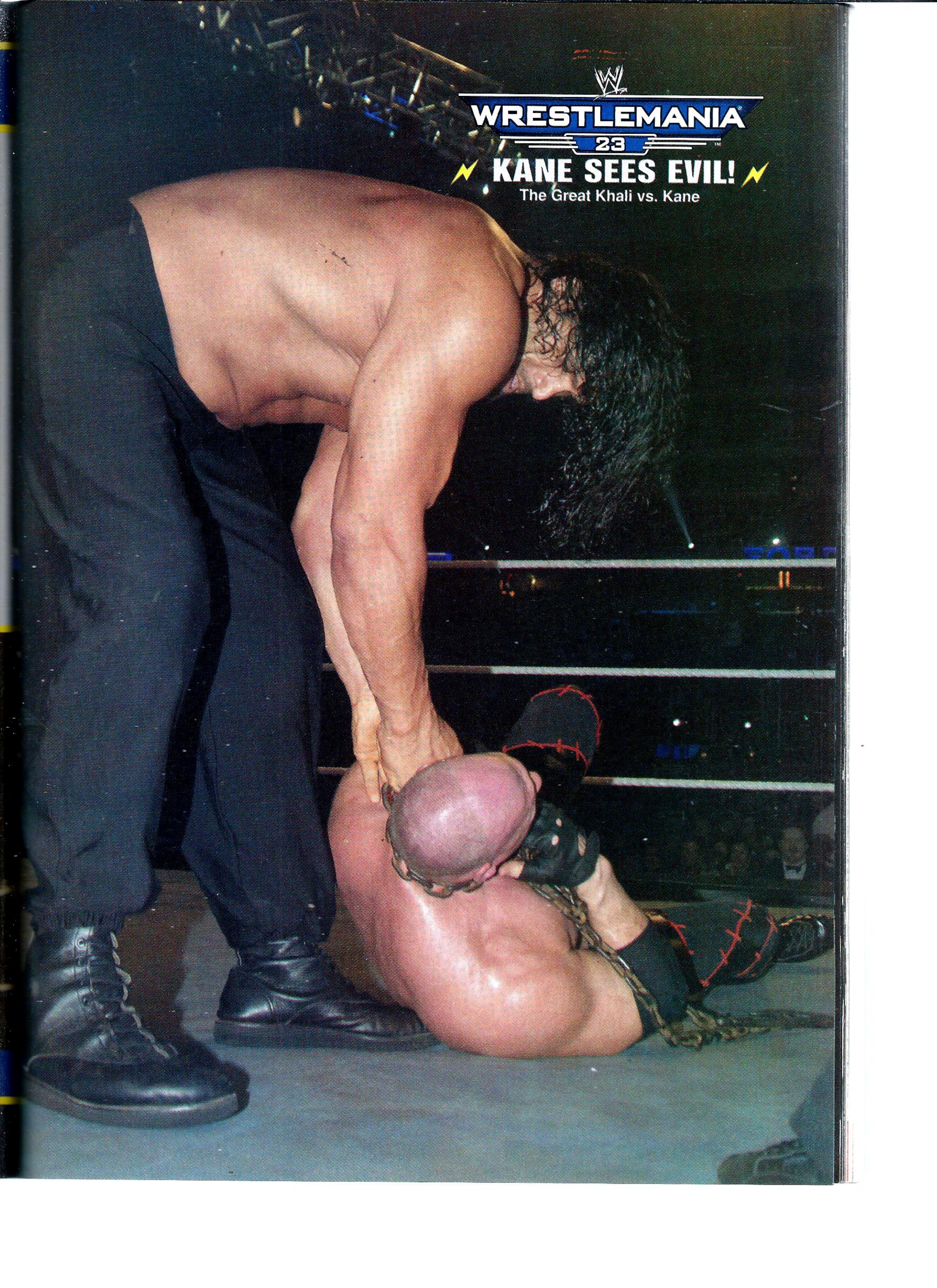


WRESTLEMANIA

23

⚡ KANE SEES EVIL! ⚡

The Great Khali vs. Kane



⚡ CHRIS BENOIT vs. MONTEL VONTAVIOUS PORTER ⚡

HOW WE GOT HERE: Montel Vontavious Porter confronted Smackdown General Manager Theodore Long and demanded a match against U.S. champion Chris Benoit for WrestleMania. Eventually, Long agreed to make the match. On the road to WrestleMania, MVP defeated various local wrestlers in one-sided matches, claiming they were the champions of various small and Third World countries when he vanquished them. Chris Benoit took little notice.

WHAT WENT DOWN: Benoit might not have taken Montel Vontavious Porter seriously before WrestleMania, but his opinion undoubtedly changed after his hard-fought match against Smackdown's "highest-paid star." MVP proved to many skeptics that he could keep pace on the mat with "The Rabid Wolverine." In fact, much of the match consisted of skilled chain wrestling exchanges between the two stars.

To the surprise of almost everyone, the young star actually out-wrestled Benoit several times during this back and forth match-up. On more than one occasion, he fought off the cripple crossface, and, in fact, Benoit was unable to apply the hold at any point in the match. In a critical moment, MVP managed to climb the ropes to counter Benoit's attempt at a diving headbutt. MVP then headbutted the champion and executed a superplex. Still, Benoit remained a step ahead, holding on to MVP's legs and scoring a two-count with an inside cradle.

It was quite an experience to watch these two go toe to toe. Because the momentum seemed to be shifting almost constantly, it was impossible to tell who would emerge the victor. In the end, though, the persistence of the U.S. champion proved too much for the challenger. Benoit connected with a total of nine



Montel Vontavious Porter delivers an elbowdrop to U.S. champion Chris Benoit. Smackdown's MVP didn't win the gold, but he made a strong enough showing to earn future title match consideration.

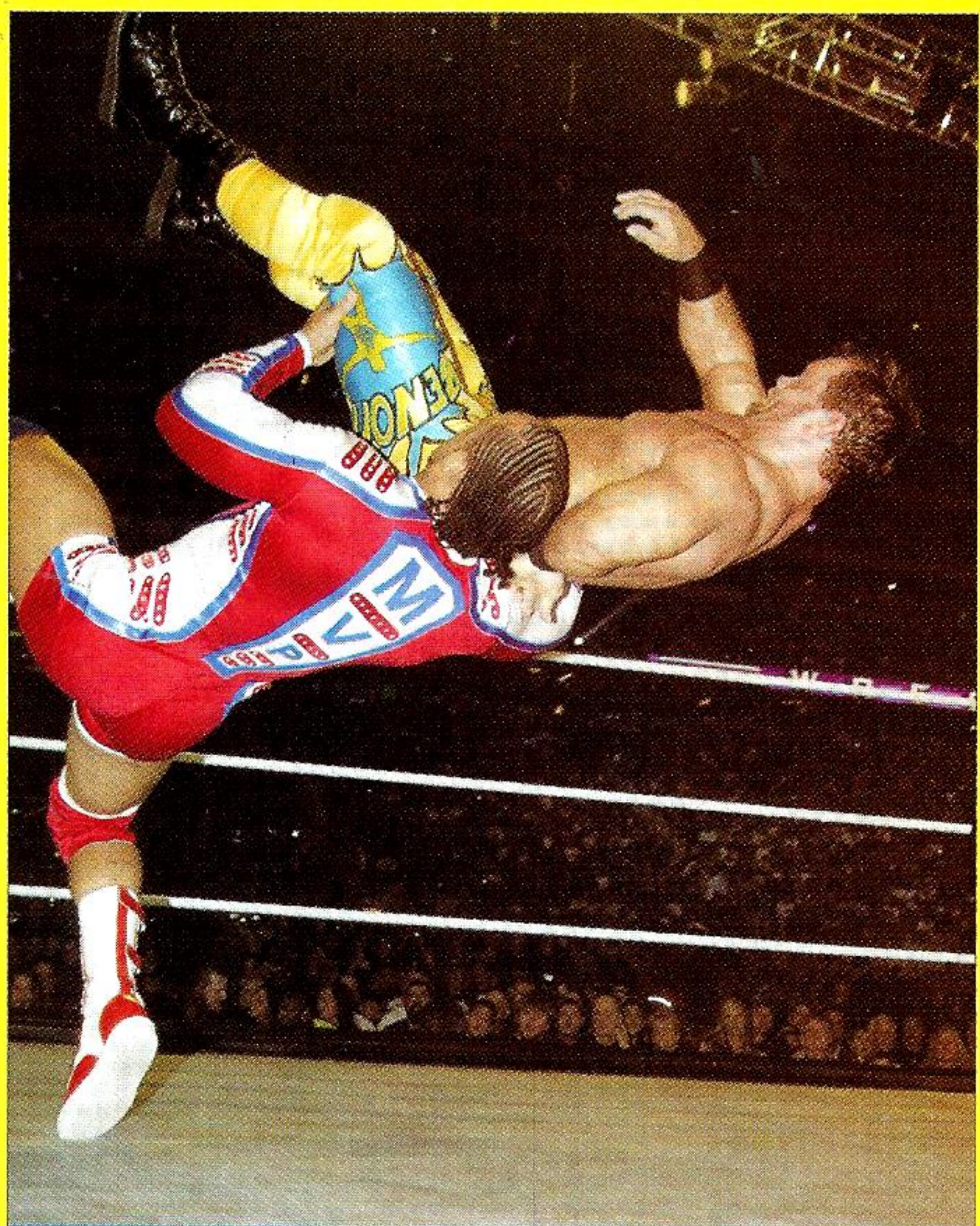
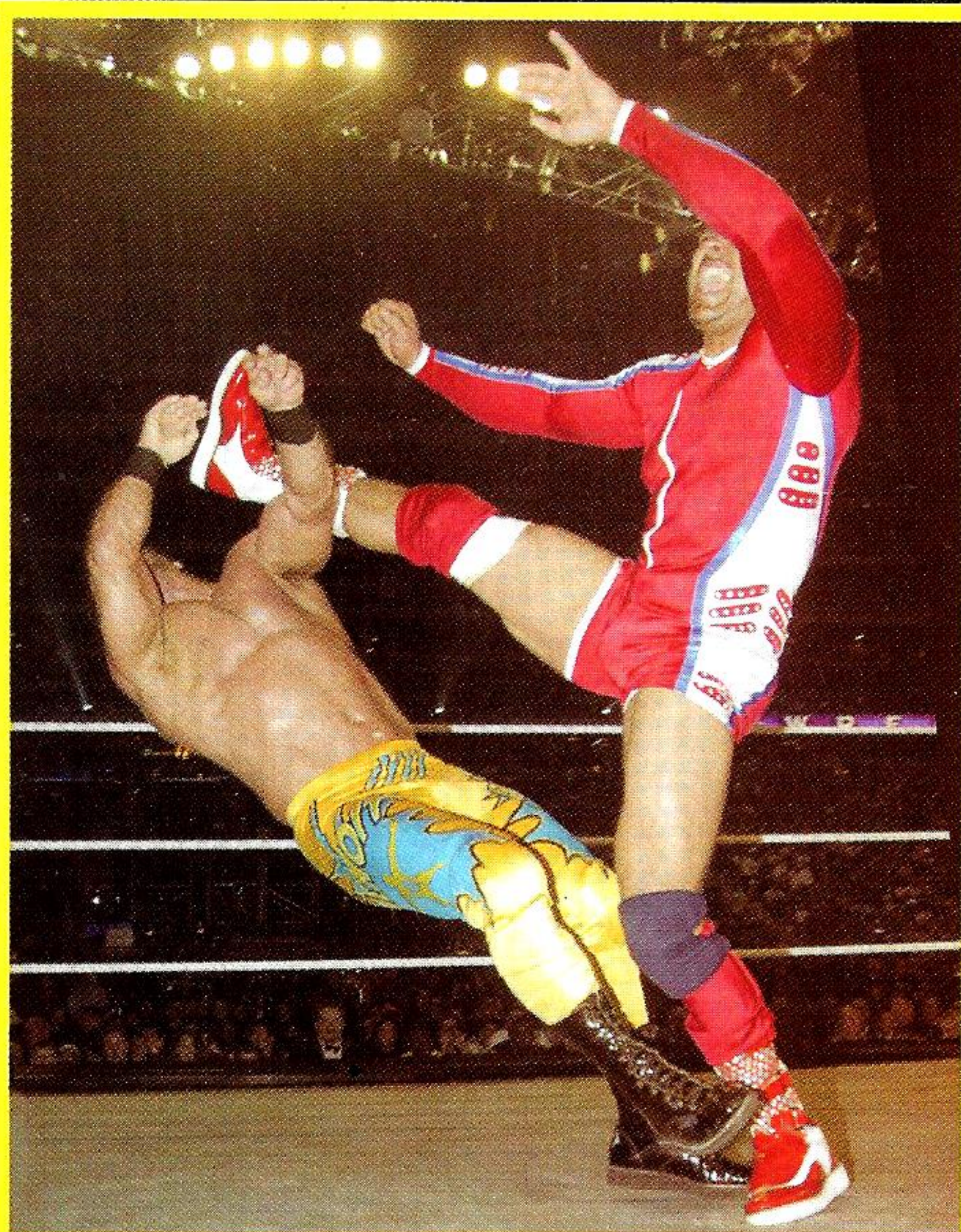


WRESTLEMANIA®

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⚡ IN THE GRIPS OF "THE WOLVERINE"! ⚡

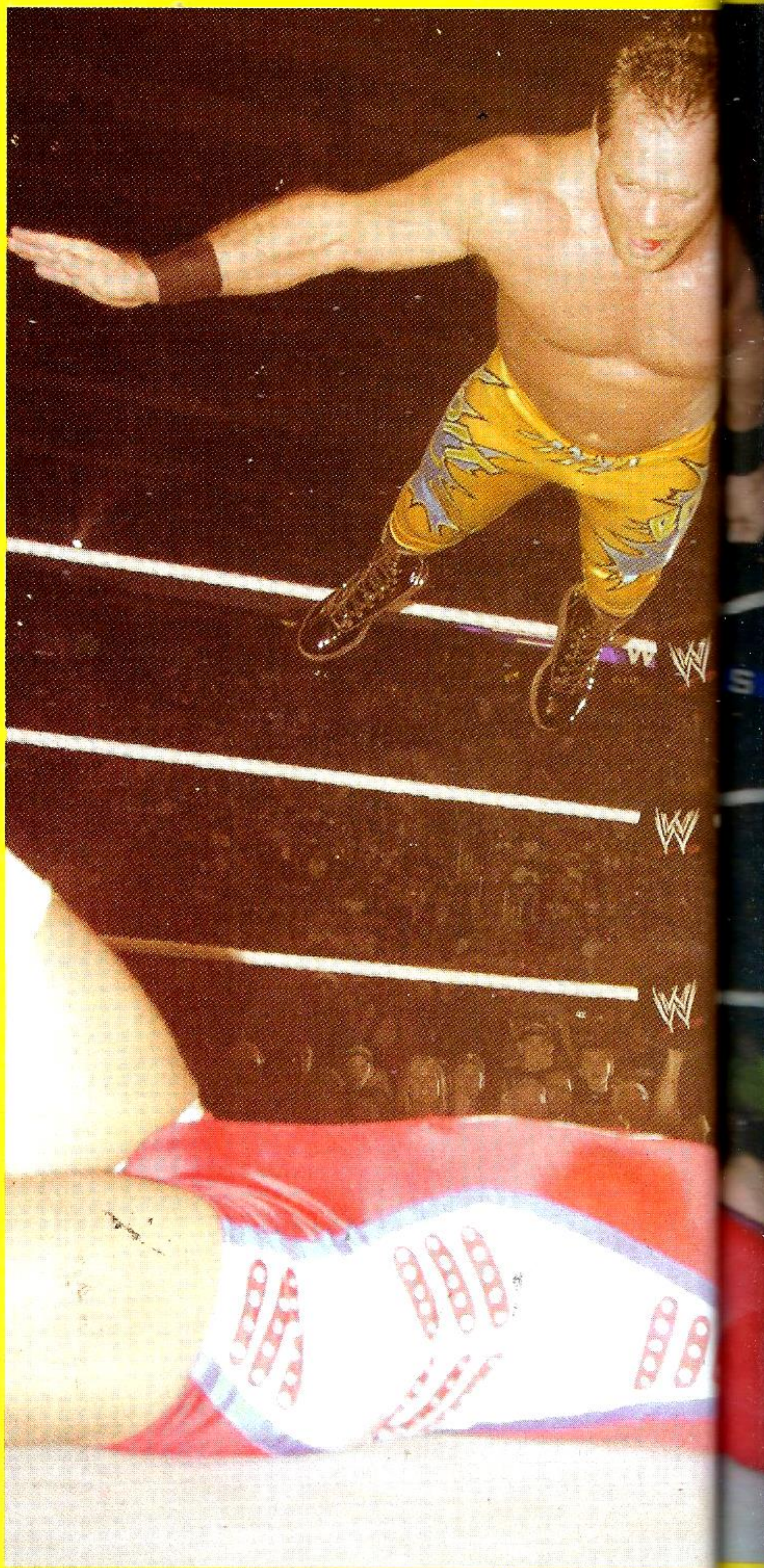
Chris Benoit vs. Montel Vontavious Porter



MVP nearly decapitates Benoit with a devastating sidekick as "The Rabid Wolverine" bounces off the ropes (top). Moments later, Porter drops Benoit with a back suplex (above). MVP had a chance of winning as long as he kept the match a high-impact game.

of his famous German suplexes throughout the match, eventually hitting his signature diving headbutt for the pinfall victory.

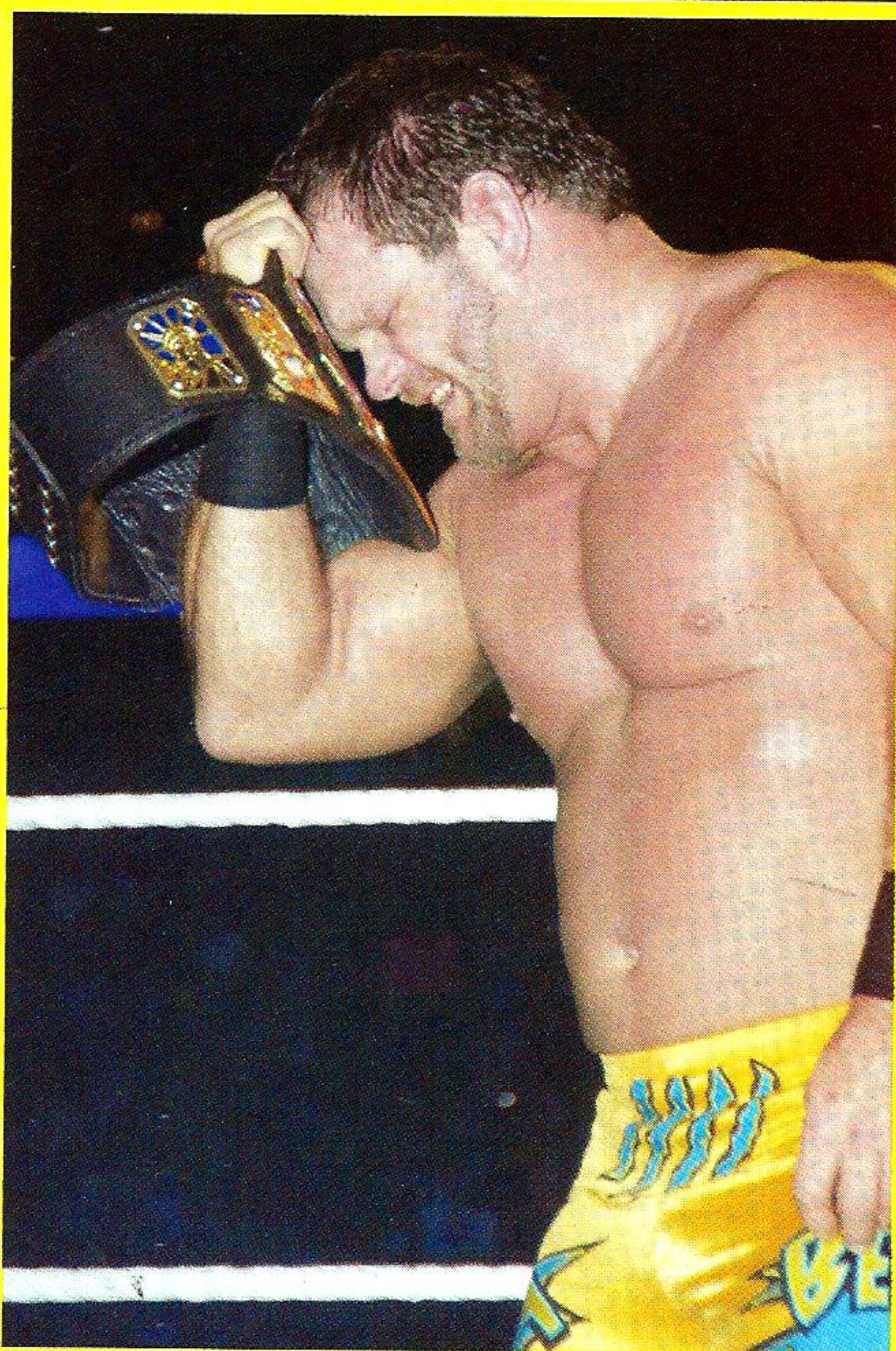
WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE: This might have been MVP's best performance in WWE so far. While Porter has a few impressive victories, including one over Kane, he didn't show everything he could do in the ring until his WrestleMania debut. This might have had something to do with his opponent. While wrestling on the independent cir-



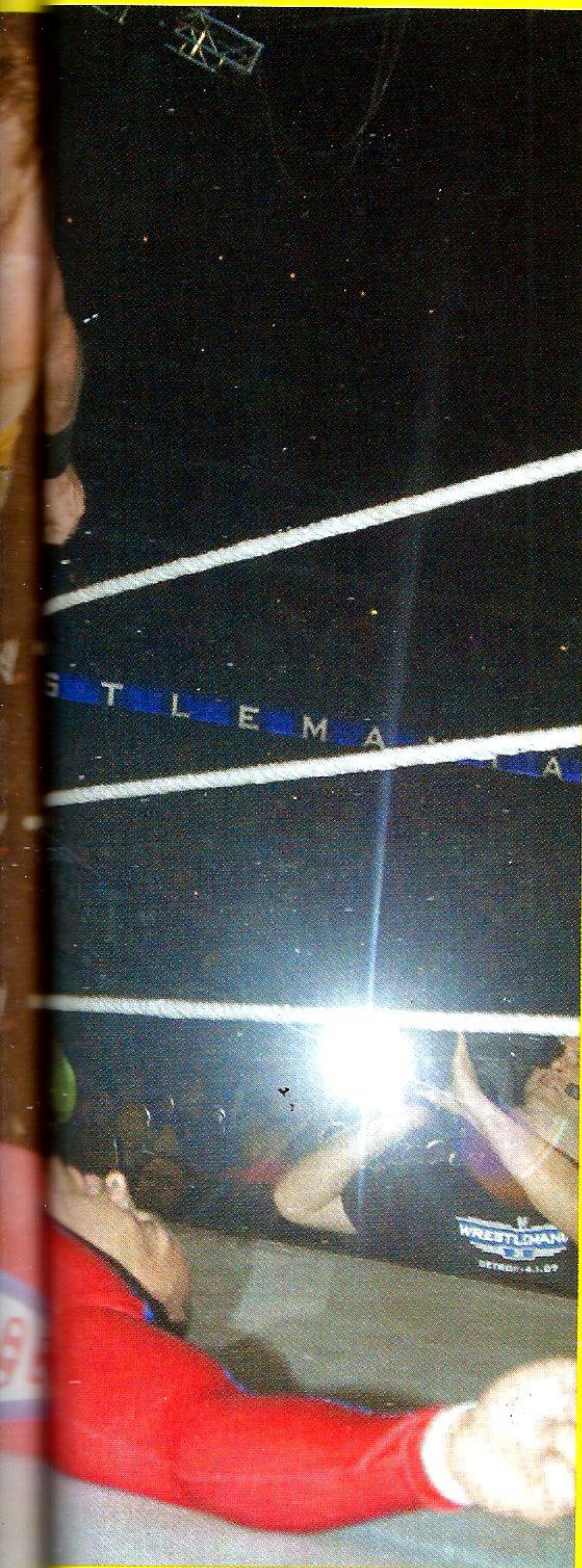
cuit, MVP used a variation of the crippler crossface as a finishing hold, calling it the TTB, which stands for "Tribute To Benoit."

Benoit likely inspired MVP to step up his game a bit, and this is certainly not surprising. Many wrestlers have had their best matches against Benoit. Chris Benoit is—and will continue to be—a measuring stick for younger grapplers. Also, MVP is coming a bit closer to living up to his name. Certainly, he's now a viable contender for the U.S. title.

Perhaps Benoit's win over Porter at WrestleMania 23 wasn't quite as sweet as his Raw World title victory at WrestleMania XX, but "The Wolverine" was very happy to leave Ford Field as the U.S. champ (right).



Benoit launches into a damaging move of his own, his patented flying headbutt (left). The U.S. champion's blend of high-impact offense and mat grappling helped him score a pinfall over his upstart challenger (below).

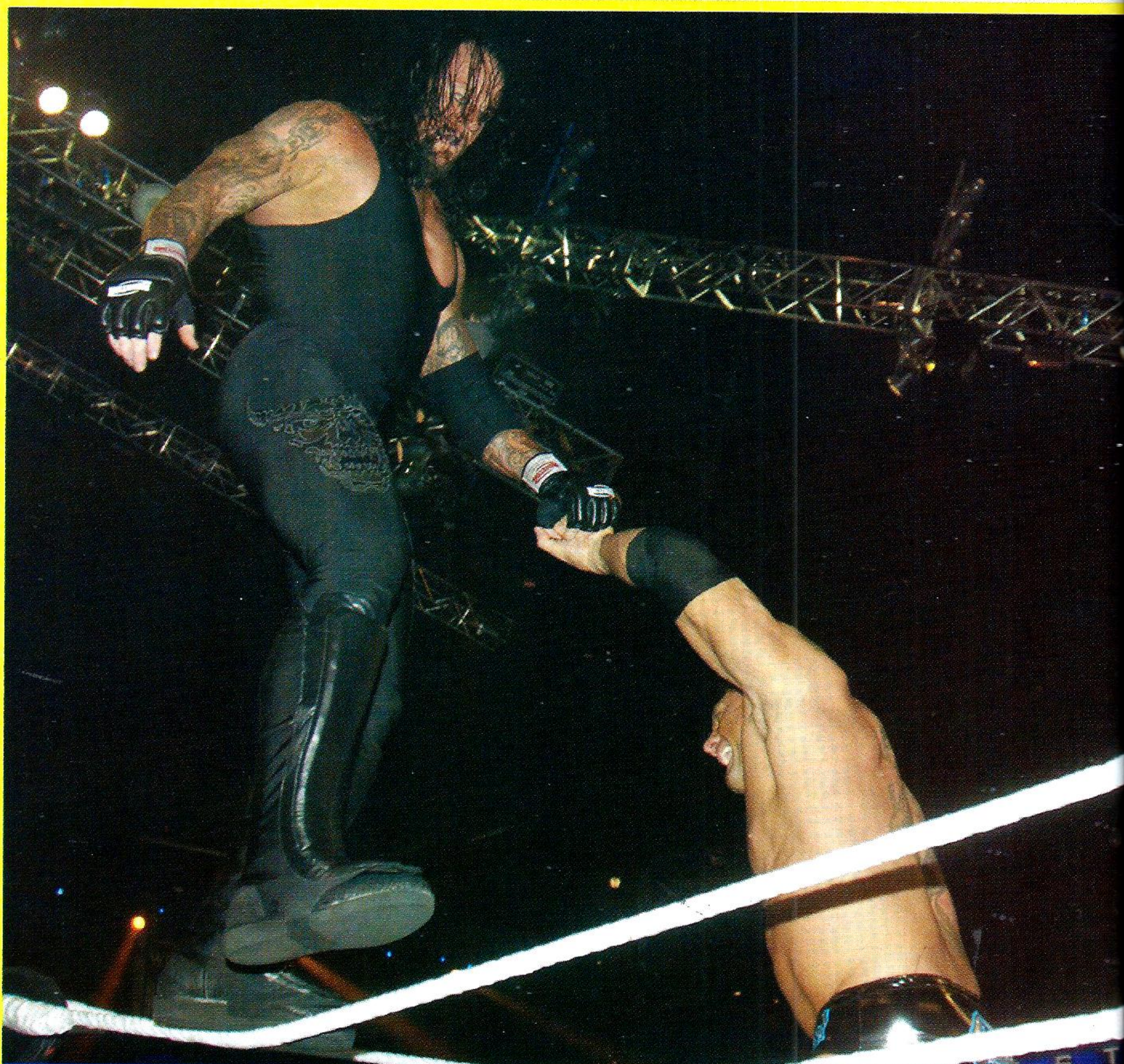


⚡ BATISTA vs. THE UNDERTAKER ⚡

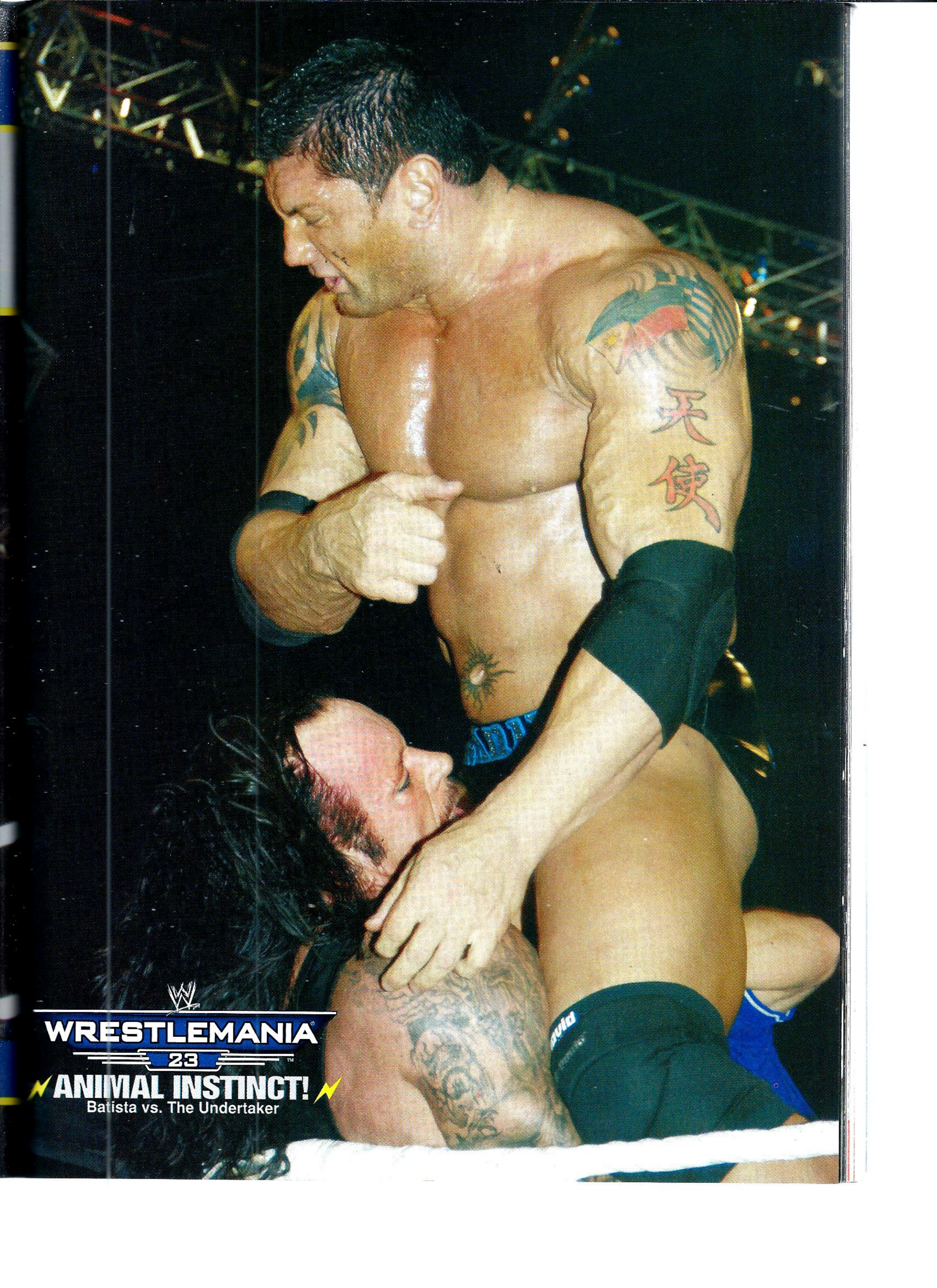
HOW WE GOT HERE: This rivalry really began in January, just weeks before The Royal Rumble. "The Dead Man" was scheduled to face Ken Kennedy, and, provided he could defeat him, 'Taker would have been inserted into the Smackdown World title match at the Rumble. Batista attacked Kennedy during the match, unintentionally disqualifying The Undertaker. When 'Taker won the Royal Rumble

match two weeks later in San Antonio, there was little doubt as to whose title he planned to take at WrestleMania.

WHAT WENT DOWN: This match was of enormous importance to both men. Batista was protecting his Smackdown World championship. 'Taker was hoping to extend his legendary WrestleMania undefeated streak to 15-0.



The Undertaker pays homage to his late mentor, The Spoiler, as he walks along the top rope before delivering a forearm. There had been talk of Undertaker retiring, but now he has not only extended his WrestleMania winning streak, but also captured the Smackdown World title.



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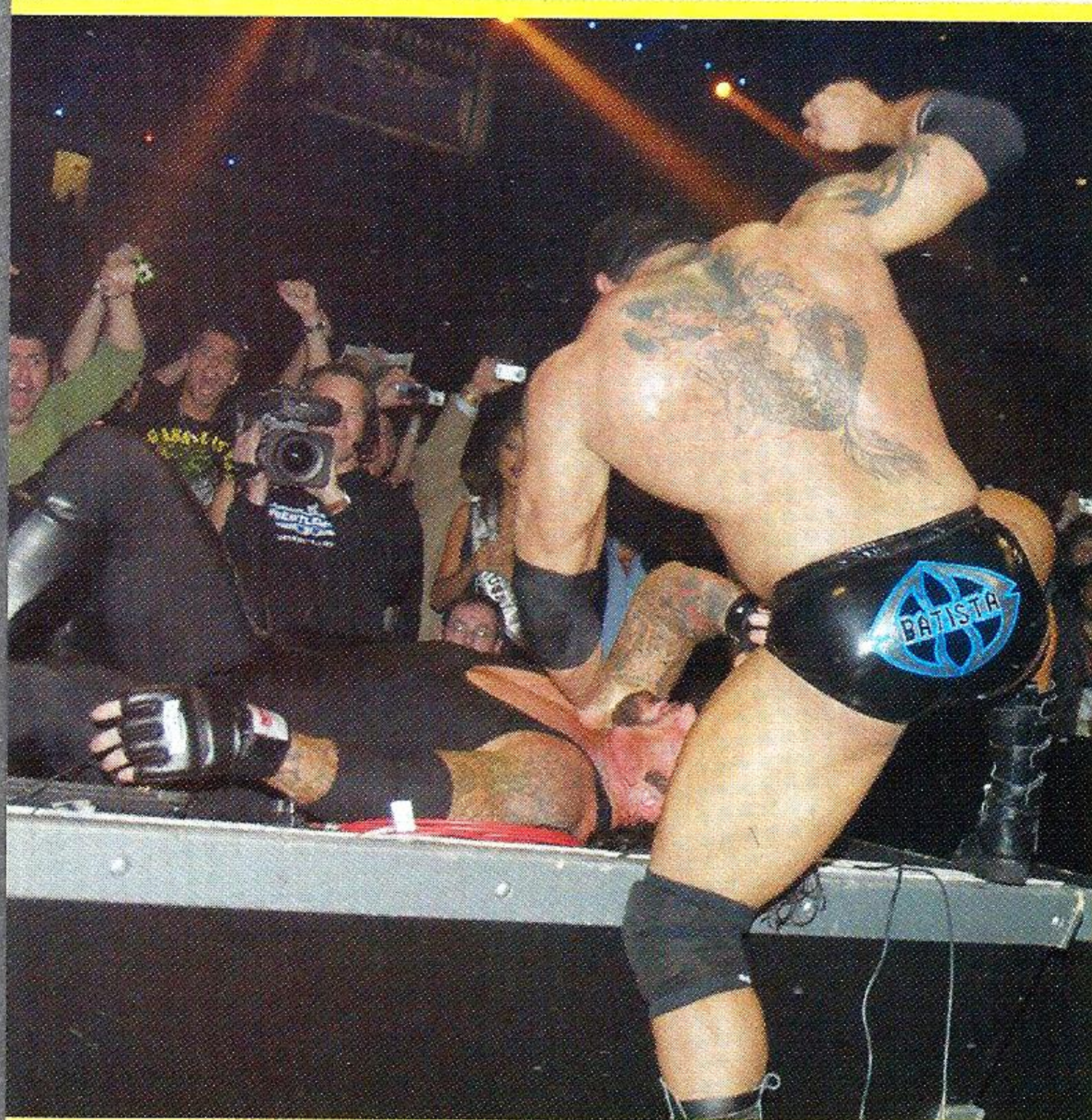
ANIMAL INSTINCT!

Batista vs. The Undertaker

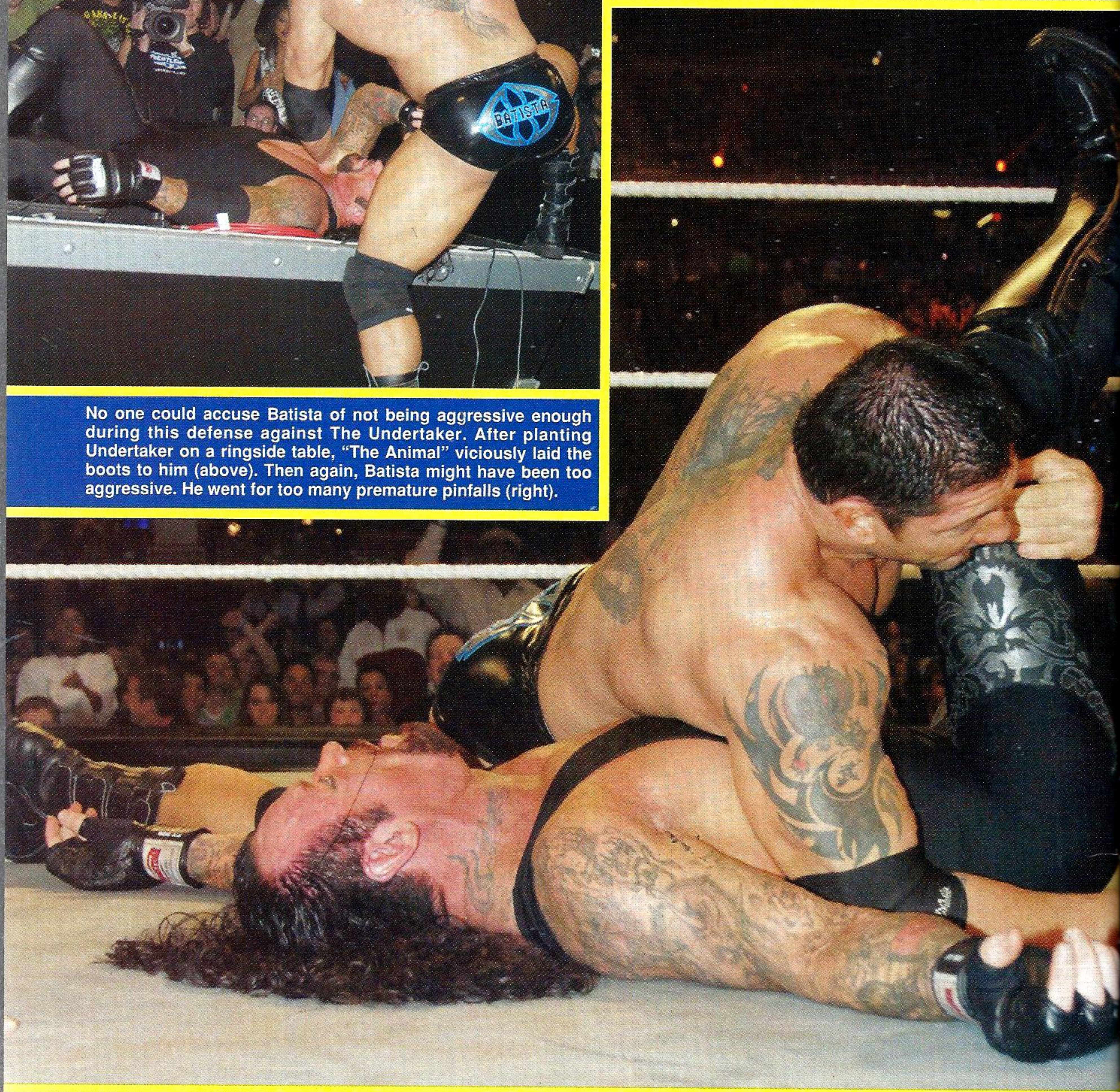
Batista started off the match with a fire that he hadn't shown in a long time. After taking 'Taker to the outside and hurtling him over the ring steps, "The Animal" brought the action back into the ring. Then, in

an extremely rare move for the defending champion, Batista climbed to the top rope and leveled "The Phenom" with a flying shoulderblock.

Undertaker soon gained the upper hand, hitting several signature moves. After going old school by walking along the top rope and delivering a clubbing forearm, 'Taker once again took the action outside. The legend flew over the top rope at Batista, delighting the capacity crowd. Soon, though, the champion regained the upper hand. Batista scooped 'Taker over his shoulder and, to the shock of thousands, power-slammed him through the ECW announce table.



No one could accuse Batista of not being aggressive enough during this defense against The Undertaker. After planting Undertaker on a ringside table, "The Animal" viciously laid the boots to him (above). Then again, Batista might have been too aggressive. He went for too many premature pinfalls (right).



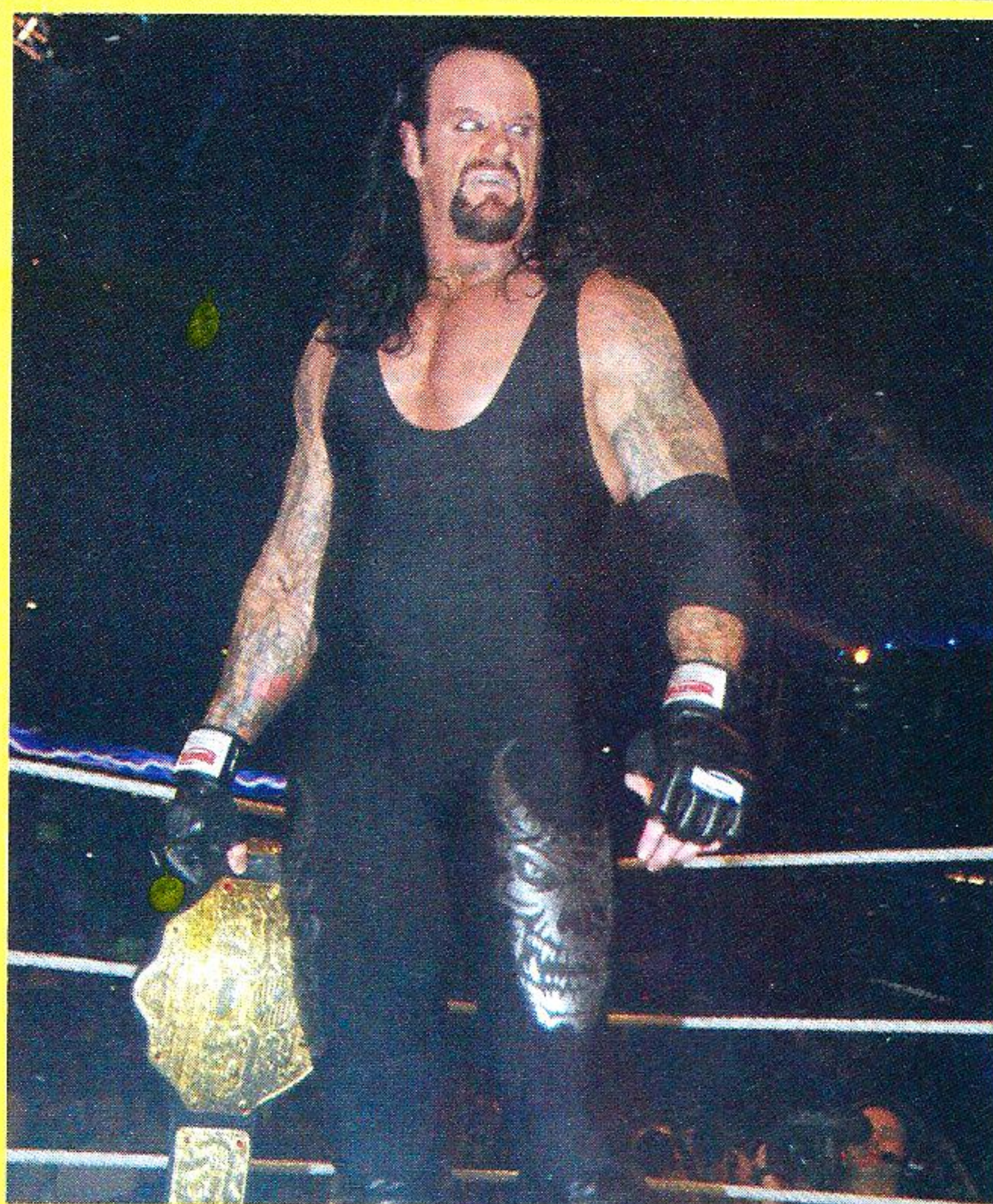
But not even the mighty Batista bomb could end Undertaker's WrestleMania streak.

After a power bomb and a chokeslam fell short, 'Taker finally put Batista away with a tombstone piledriver. The crowd was on its feet as "The Dead Man" celebrated his first WWE World championship in nearly five years.

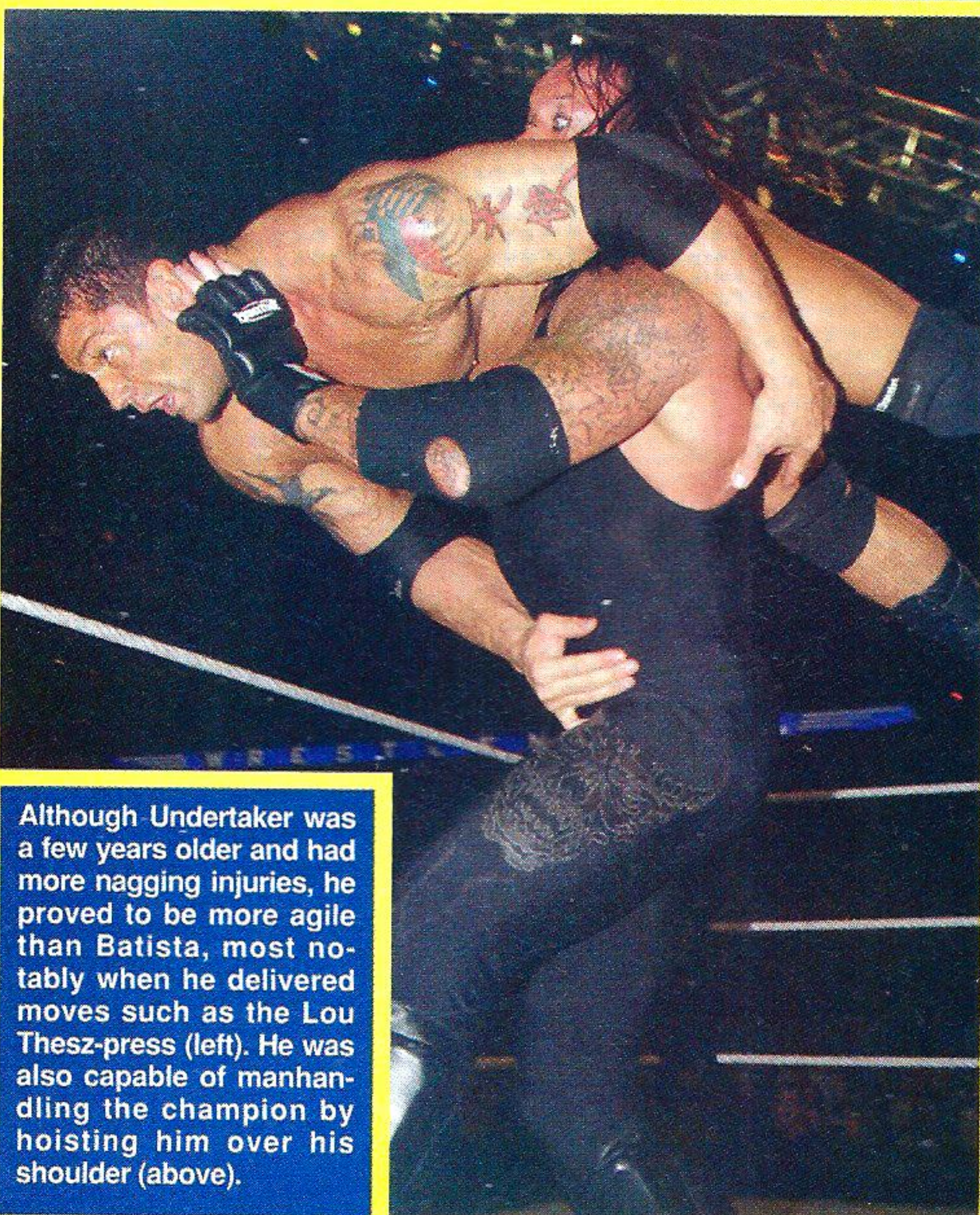
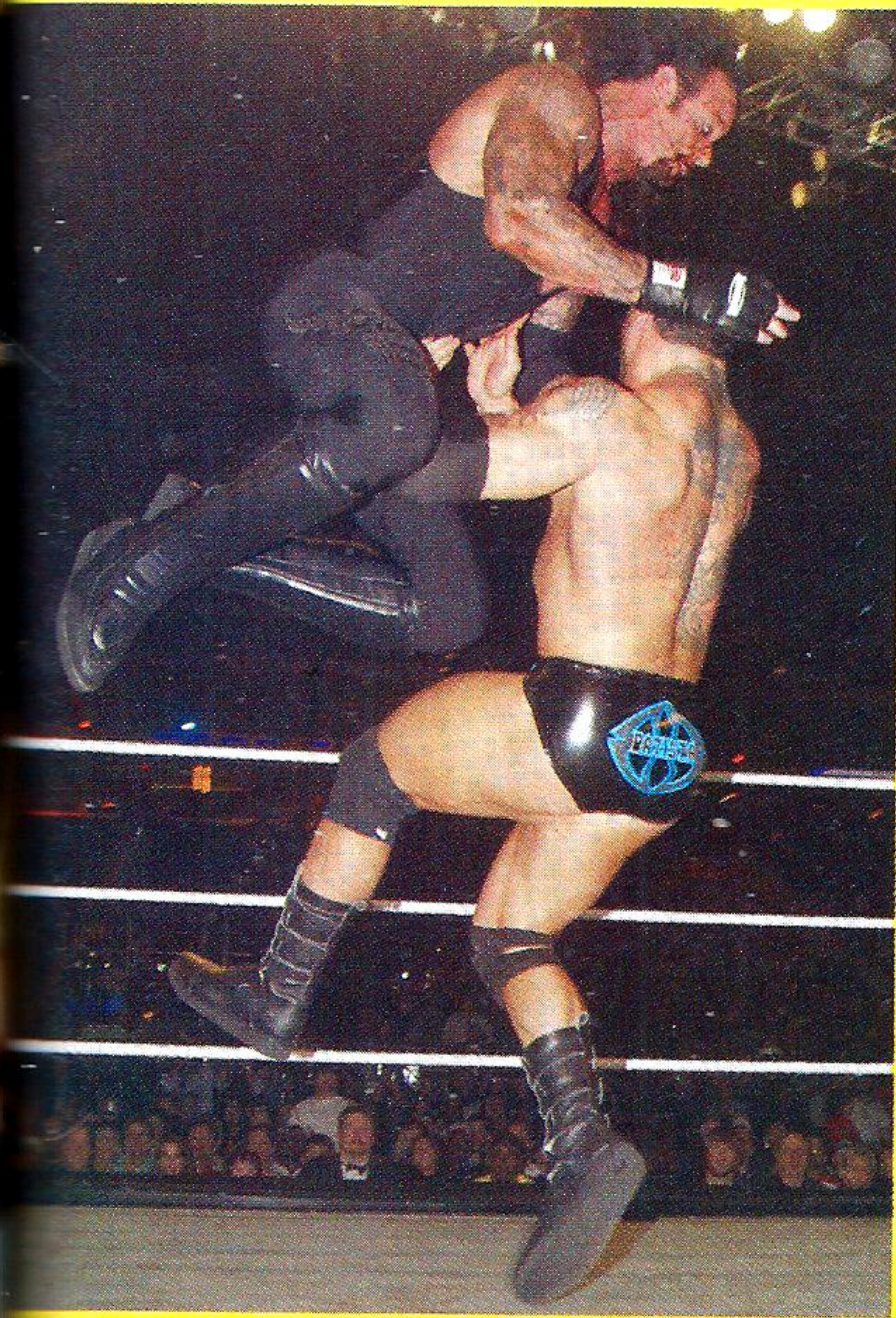
WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE: The news that The Undertaker has won the Smackdown championship could mean a ratings boost for Smackdown. There are certainly a variety of interesting potential matchups for the new champion. Presumably, the first challenger will be Batista.

On paper, the loss doesn't look good for Batista. After all, it took him months to reclaim the Smackdown World title. His path to the championship was far from glorious. Batista has a history of performing better at big events, and his intensity and passion were evident at WrestleMania. His title loss to Undertaker might have been a blow, but it was also, arguably, Batista's finest match in years.

If Batista continues to compete with the sort of fervor he demonstrated at 'Mania, Smackdown will benefit greatly. Undertaker, whose blend of power and agility remains unparalleled, is guaranteed to be a valuable asset to the Smackdown brand. These two fan favorites are likely to generate great interest, as well as many memorable matches, in the coming months.



The Undertaker was a former four-time WWE World champion when he entered WrestleMania 23, and now he has the "15 pounds of gold," the world title belt representing the Smackdown brand. Undertaker has gained surprising momentum at this stage of his career.



Although Undertaker was a few years older and had more nagging injuries, he proved to be more agile than Batista, most notably when he delivered moves such as the Lou Thesz-press (left). He was also capable of manhandling the champion by hoisting him over his shoulder (above).

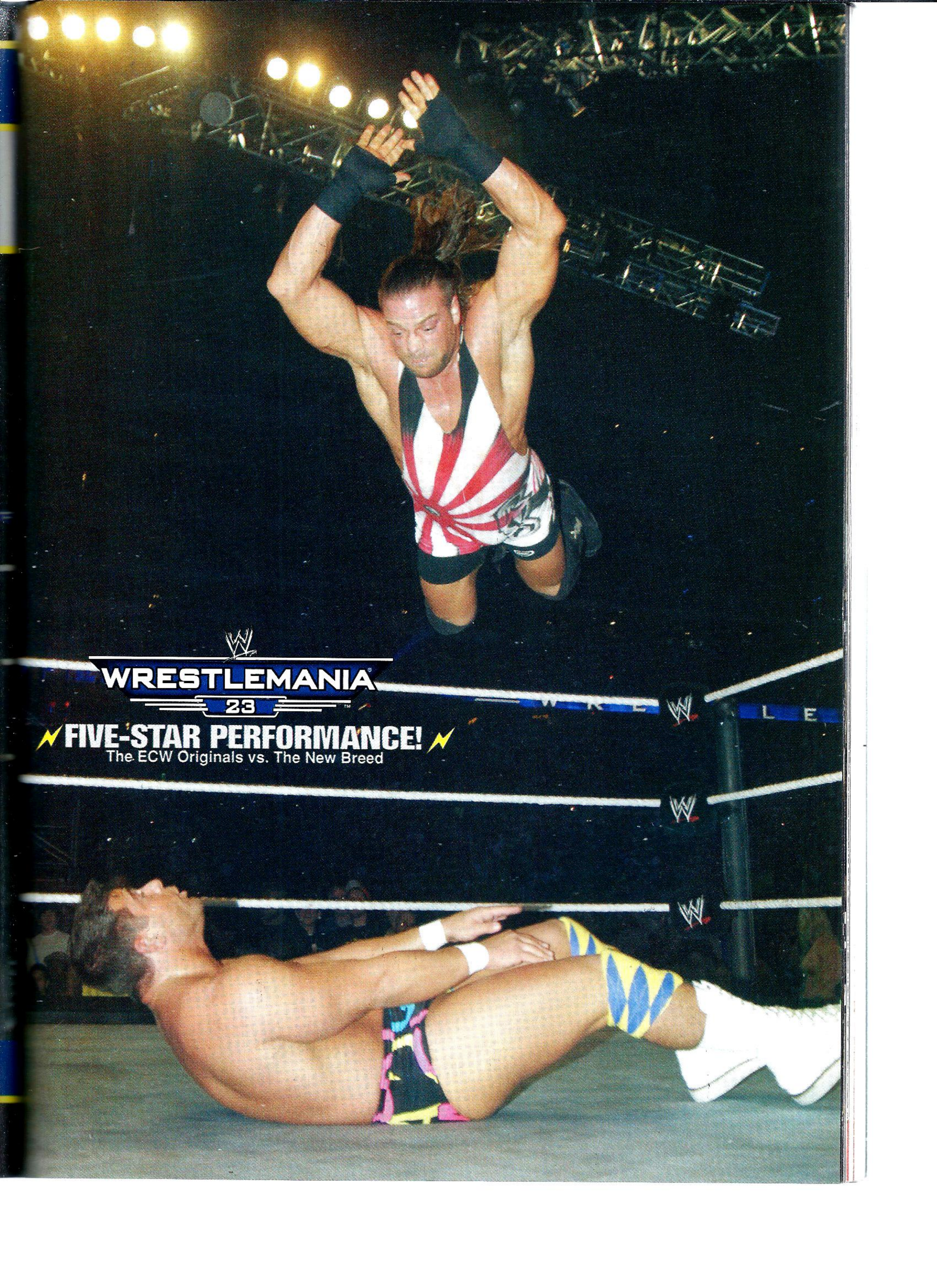
⚡ THE ECW ORIGINALS vs. THE NEW BREED ⚡

HOW WE GOT HERE: The ECW New Breed has been trying to dismantle the few remains of the original ECW, piece by piece, for the past several months. Thanks to the cohesiveness of Rob Van Dam, Sabu, Tommy Dreamer, and The Sandman, however, they have been

unsuccessful thus far. Elijah Burke was appointed by Vince McMahon as part of his "vision for the new ECW." Burke has taken this vision to heart, recruiting Kevin Thorn, Matt Striker, and newcomer Marcus Cor Von to help him take over Extreme Championship Wrestling.



Sandman and Dreamer mount a comeback with a double-elbow to Elijah Burke's chest. The Originals worked more cohesively as a unit than the New Breed, and their edge in experience paid off under the bright WrestleMania lights.

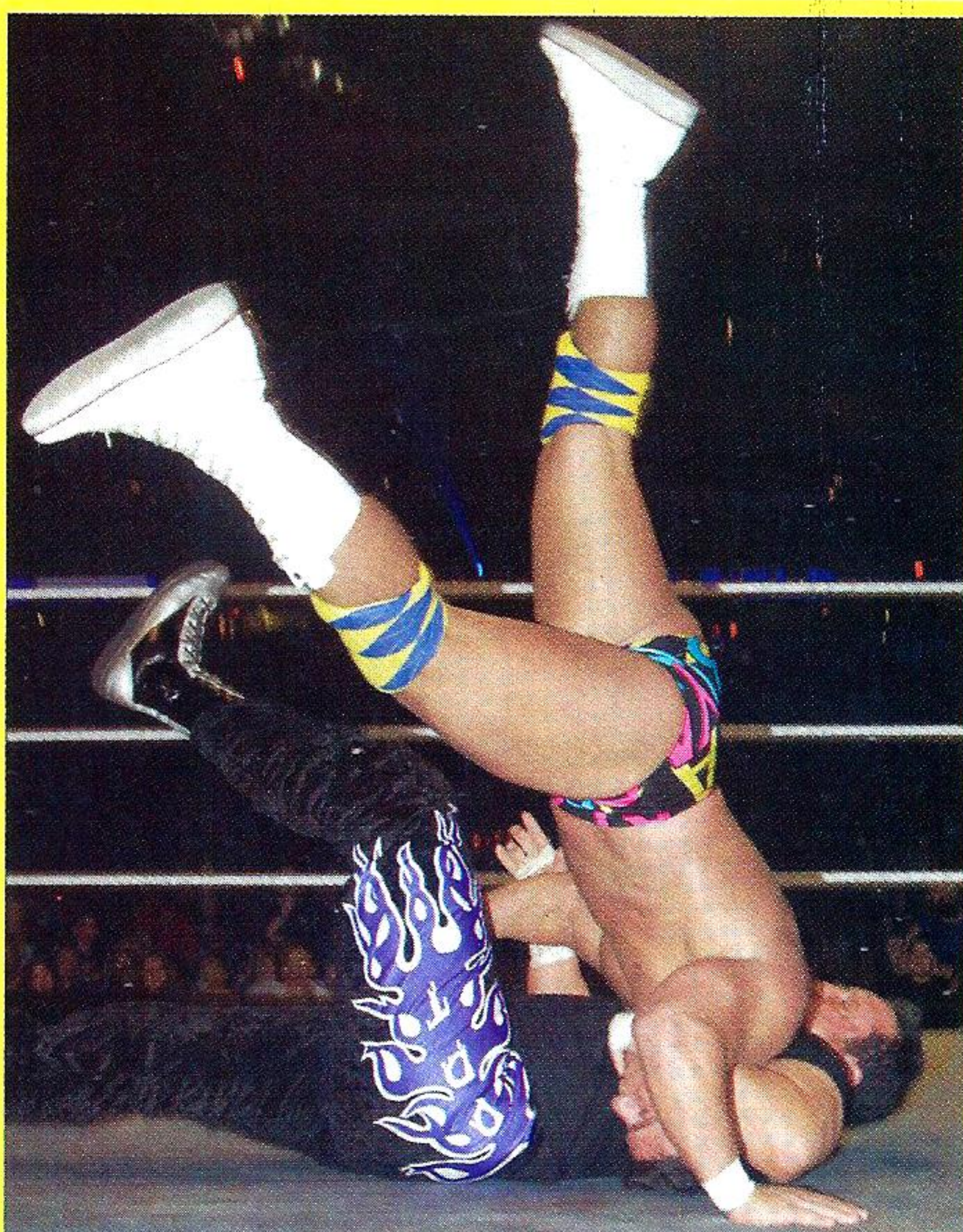


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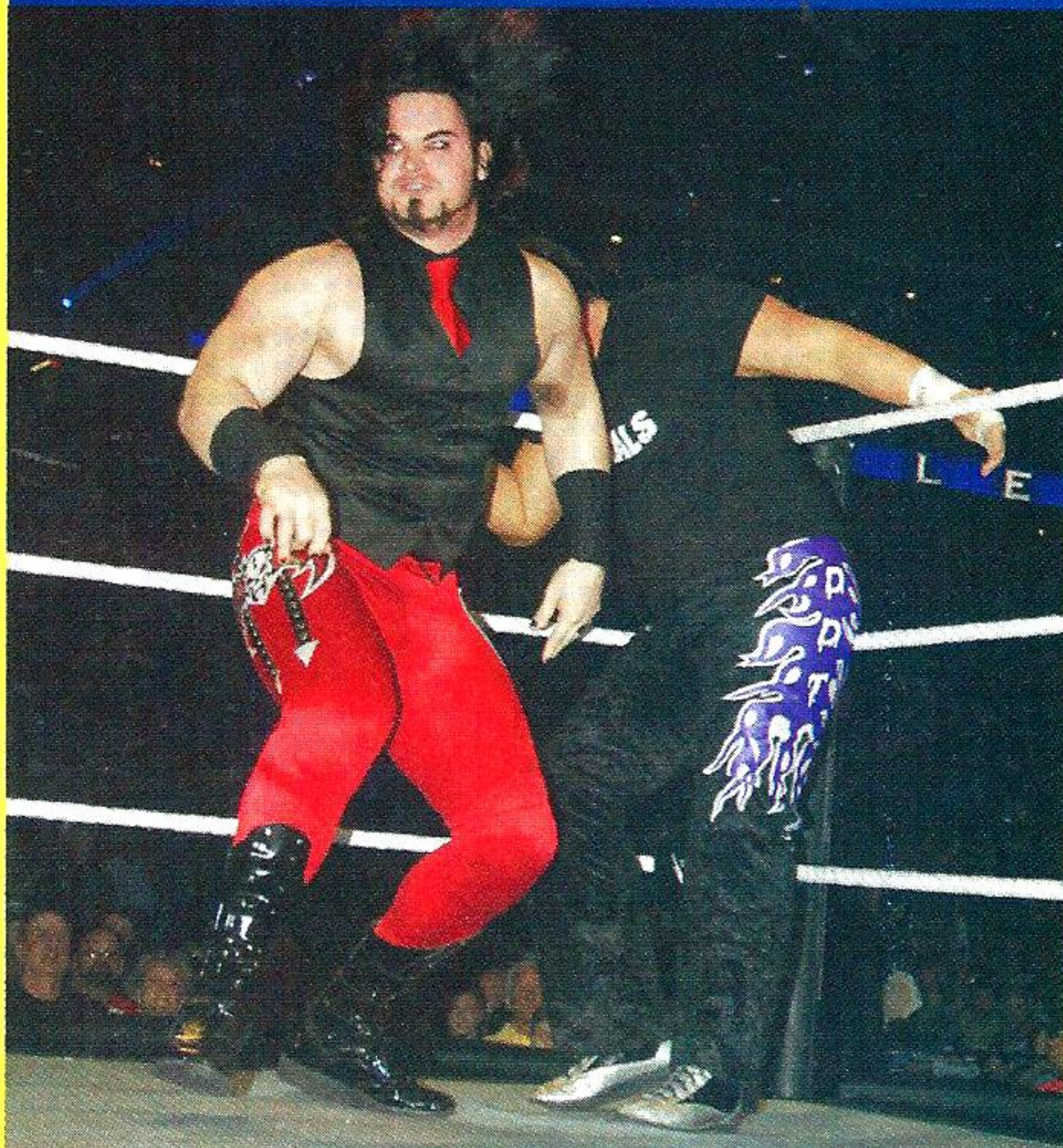
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FIVE-STAR PERFORMANCE!

The ECW Originals vs. The New Breed



As is often the case, Dreamer's DDT was the turning point of the match. Dreamer was able to incapacitate a fresher wrestler, Matt Striker, with his signature move. The New Breed might have underestimated the Originals' determination at 'Mania.



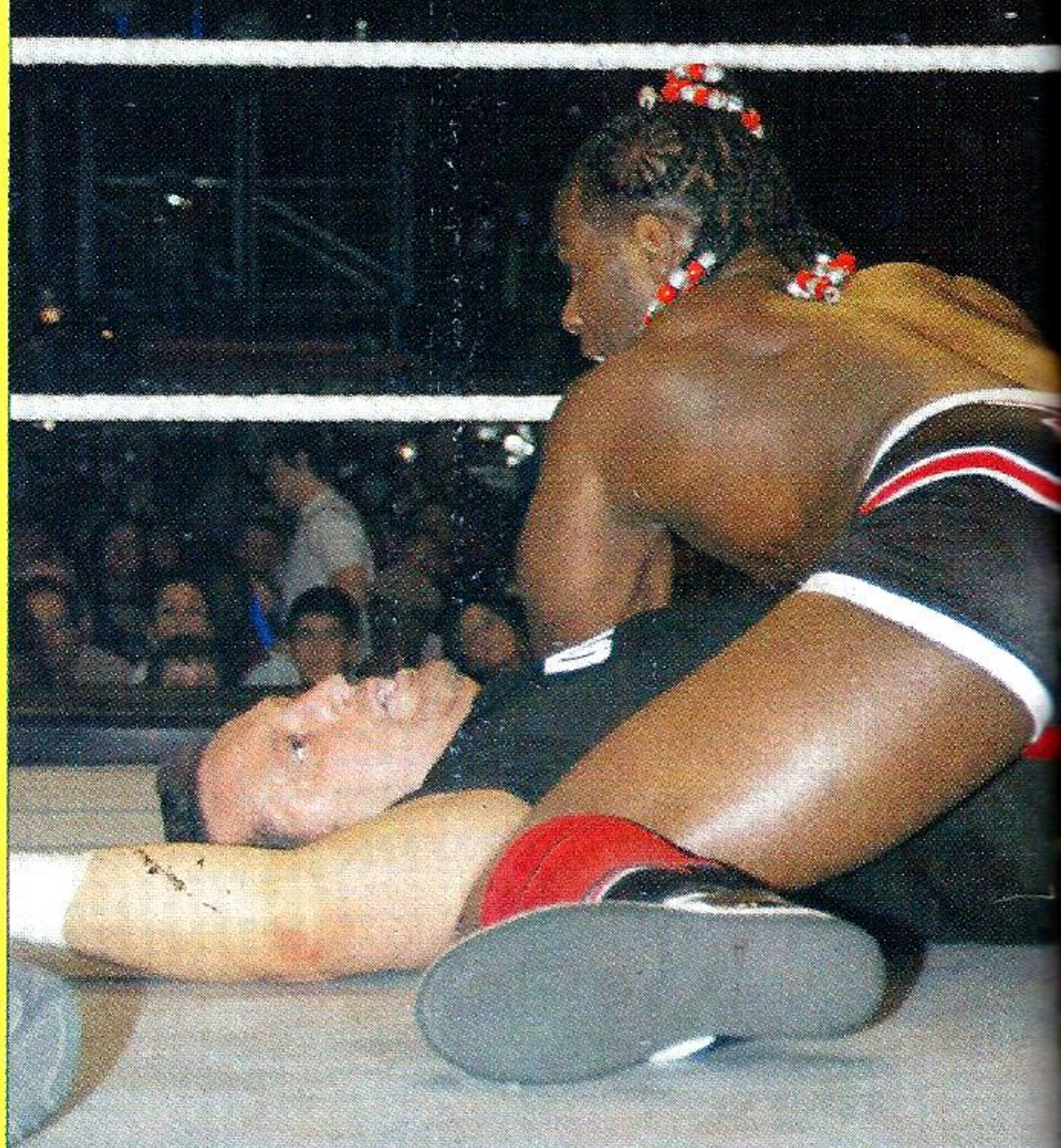
For whatever reason, the New Breed took particular delight in targeting Tommy Dreamer in the sole ECW match to take place at WrestleMania 23. For up-and-comers such as Kevin Thorn, Dreamer represents the heart and soul of the original ECW.

WHAT WENT DOWN: The Originals functioned flawlessly as a team in the early going of the match, taking turns against Striker. The veteran team still seemed to have control of the bout, even as Striker tagged a fresh Burke. That changed, however, when Cor Von caught Dreamer with a knee to the back. The New Breed then demonstrated that they, too, could be an effective team.

The New Breed members unleashed an impressive onslaught against "The Innovator Of Violence." The four men made frequent tags, all the while performing various offensive and double-team maneuvers on a vulnerable Dreamer. It looked bleak for the Originals until Dreamer caught Cor Von with a neckbreaker and executed an inverted DDT on Burke, allowing him to tag a fresh Van Dam.

RVD launched a flurry of offense, and a rested Striker was no match for him. After hitting a monkey flip and rolling thunder, Van Dam set up Striker for the five-star frog splash. The frog splash was delayed temporarily, however, as the New Breed and Originals fought in and around the ring. Dreamer dropped Striker with a DDT and Van Dam finished him off with a frog splash.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE: This was a fast-paced match that took about six minutes. It was surprisingly fluid for an eight-man tag match, which is a credit to the two teams, as the chemistry between each group of four is what made the match work so well.



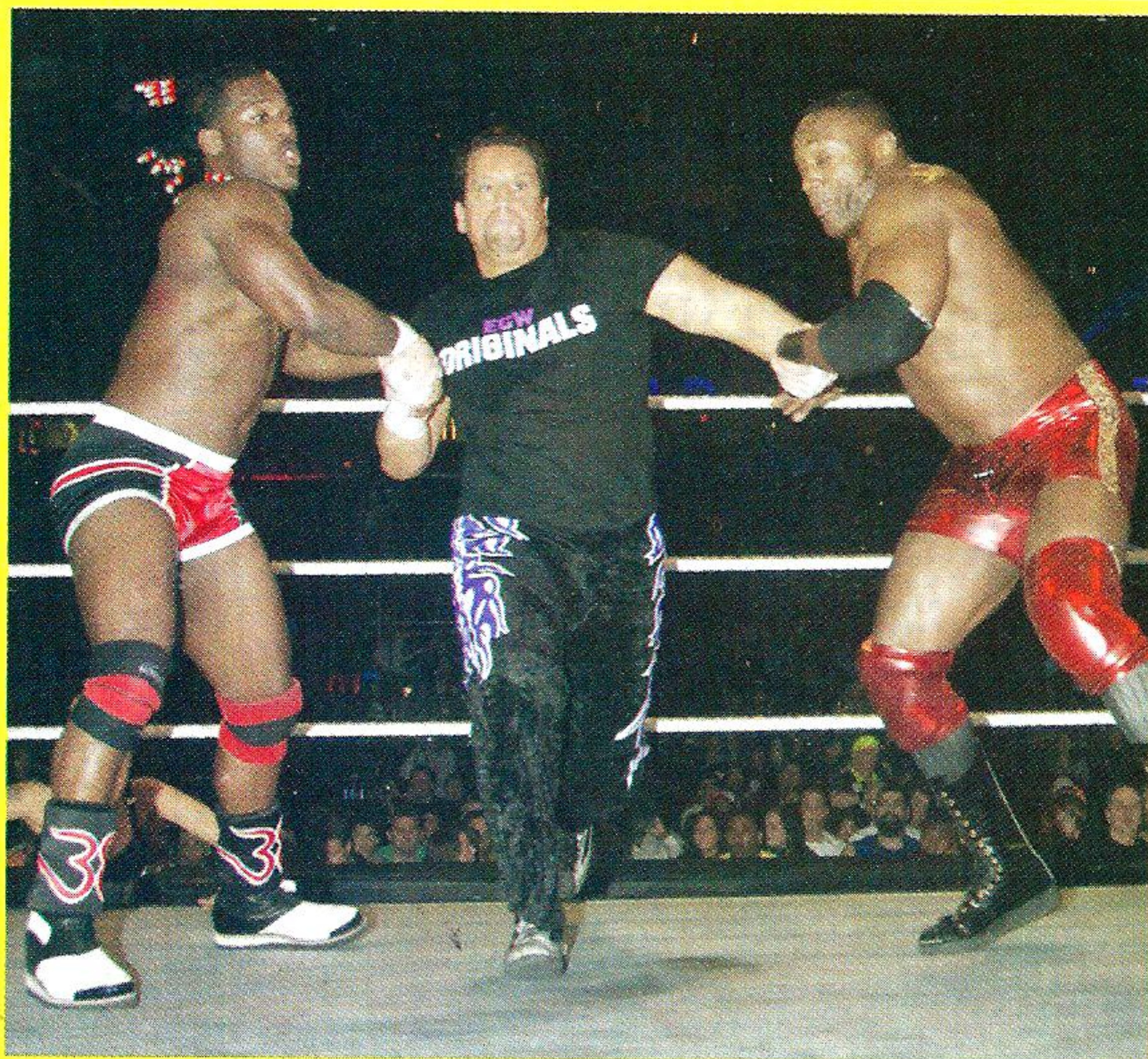
To their credit, the New Breed members also displayed plenty of heart and desire. Burke came close to securing a victory for his team several times, including when he covered Dreamer for this pin attempt.

The New Breed is a dangerous team, but the Originals proved that the young upstarts have a lot to learn about making it in ECW.

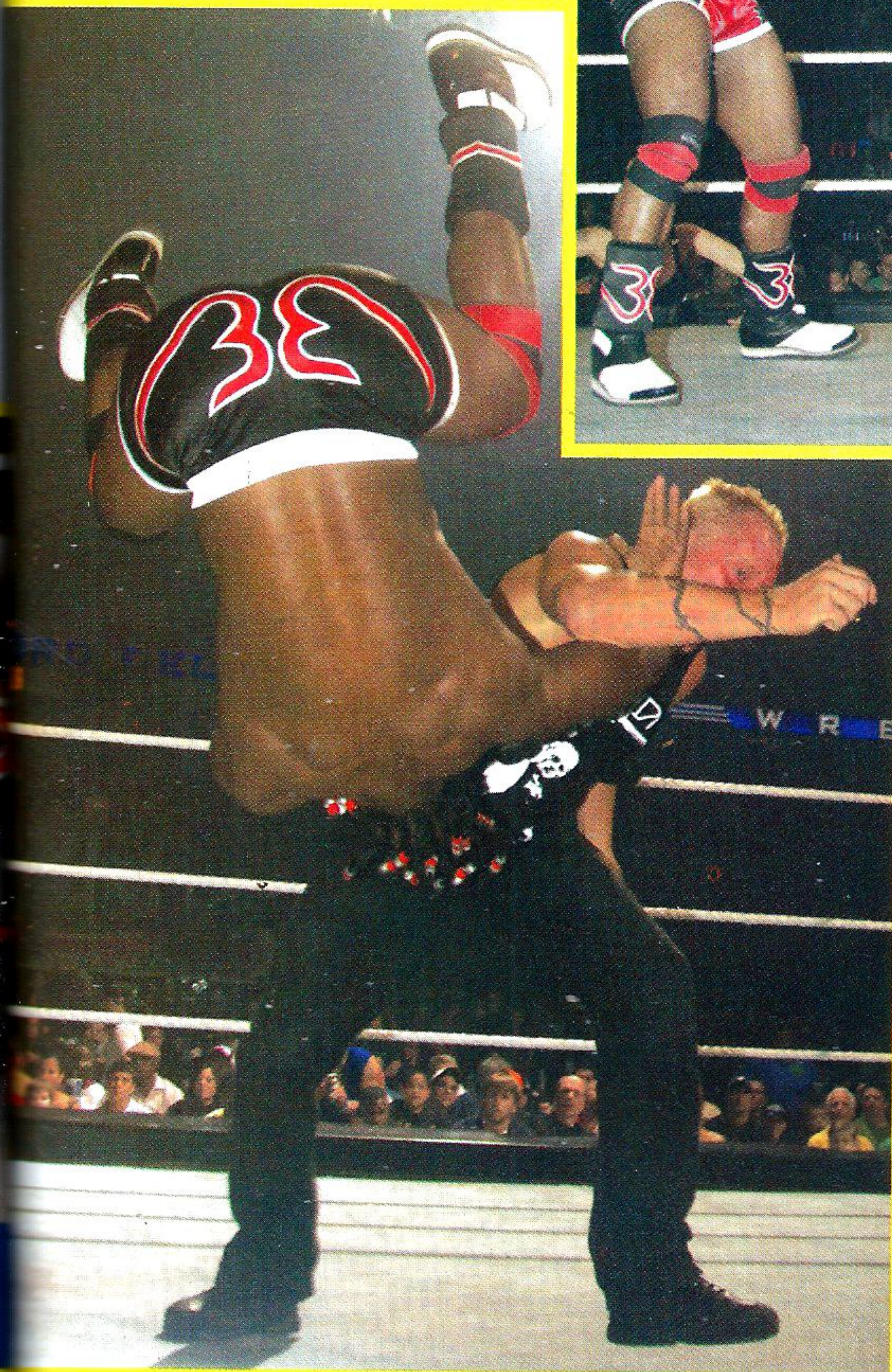
It was surprising that the New Breed didn't pull this one out, because the Originals have had a number of bad breaks in the past few months. More surprising is that Van Dam was so dominant and scored a fairly easy three-count. Perhaps his streak of bad luck in the new ECW is over. And maybe—just maybe—there isn't any truth to the rumors that he'll be jumping to TNA.

The most unfortunate aspect of this match, and what it implied about the future, was its length. It wasn't the shortest match on the card (that honor belonged to the "Lumberjill" match later

in the night), but it was still rather brief for a match featuring eight wrestlers. This, coupled with the conspicuous absence of Joey Styles' voice during the "Money In The Bank" match, is a subtle hint that ECW will continue to be the definitive "C" brand this year. Let's hope not.



Burke and Cor Von, whipping Dreamer across the ring, exhibited good teamwork during their showdown with the ECW Originals. If a tag team championship is established in ECW, any combination of the New Breed would be dangerous contenders.



In a rare display of scientific skill, The Sandman sent Burke reeling with this hiptoss. Time and again, the Originals surprised the New Breed with moves not commonly associated with their repertoire.

⚡ BOBBY LASHLEY vs. UMAGA ⚡

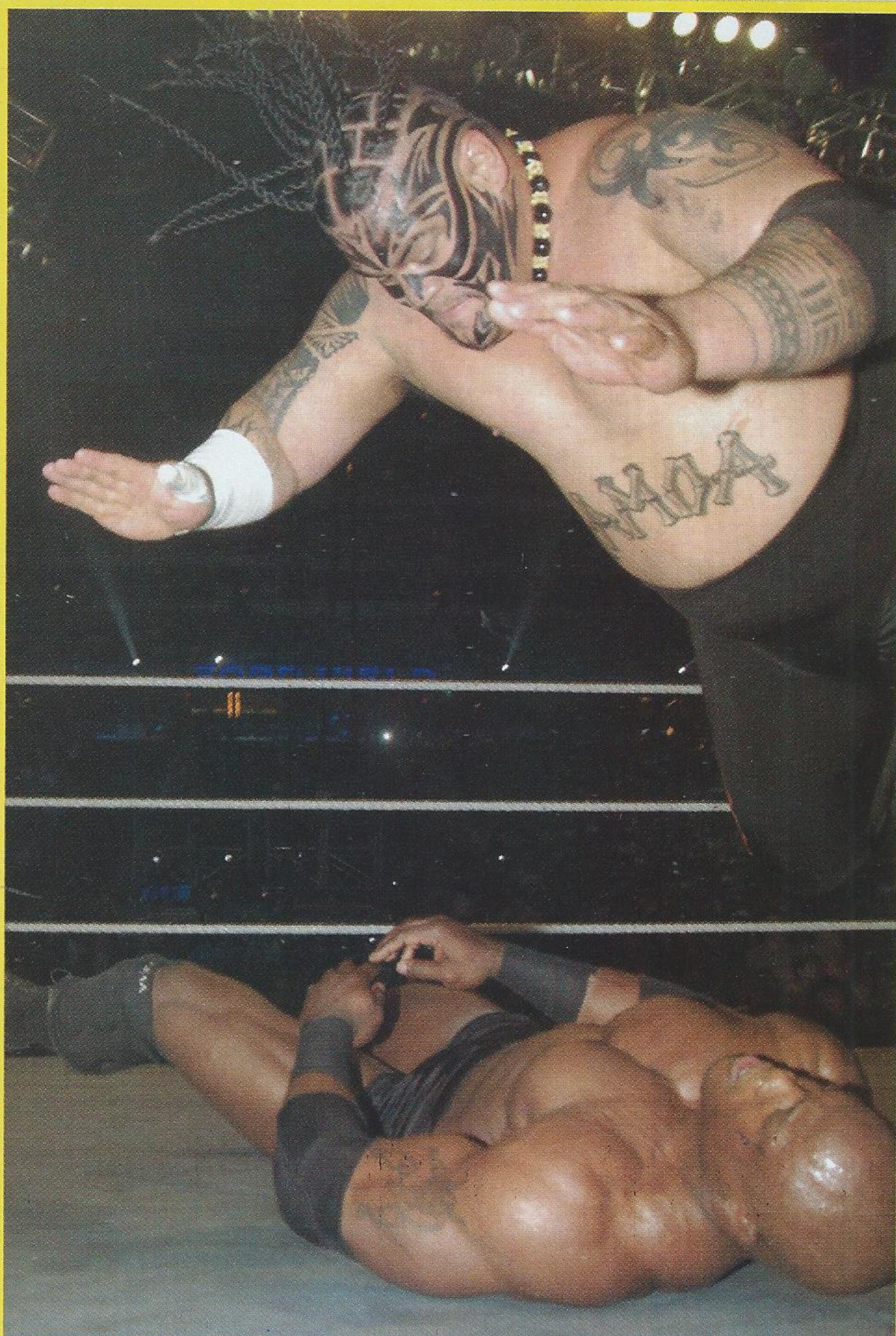
HOW WE GOT HERE: Mr. McMahon put on a sketch that lampooned the Donald Trump-Rosie O'Donnell feud. Trump didn't think it was funny and let McMahon know it. Subsequently, Trump arranged to have cash dropped from the rafters and onto the Raw audience,

and told Vince this is what the fans wanted. An offended McMahon invited Trump to Raw. Each man agreed to be in a wrestler's corner at 'Mania. McMahon picked Umaga while Trump picked ECW champion Bobby Lashley. If Umaga won, Trump's head would be shaved. If Lashley won, McMahon's head would be shaved.

Later, WWE's Board of Directors informed McMahon that they wanted "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin to be the special referee for the match-up. "The Battle Of The Billionaires" was on.

WHAT WENT DOWN: Lashley, with Trump in his corner, took it to Umaga in the opening minutes of the bout. Umaga's handler, Armando Alejandro Estrada, tried to interfere right away, but he was power-slammed and then thrown from the ring. Just when it seemed Lashley was making easy work of "The Samoan Bulldozer," Umaga recovered. From this point, Umaga dominated much of the match. Mr. McMahon was all smiles.

Much to the chagrin of referee "Stone-Cold," the Intercontinental champ made a habit of attacking Lashley on the ropes. Austin used force to stop him on several occasions. After one such incident, Shane McMahon charged into the ring. Austin turned to get rid of him, but was met with Umaga's Samoan spike. With "Stone-Cold" out of the picture, the younger McMahon came into the ring and began laying the boots—in this case, sneakers—into Lashley. Vince grabbed a trashcan from under the ring, and, with Umaga's help, held it in front of Lashley's face. With the ECW champ helpless, Shane O'Mac climbed the turnbuckles and delivered his version of the Van Terminator.



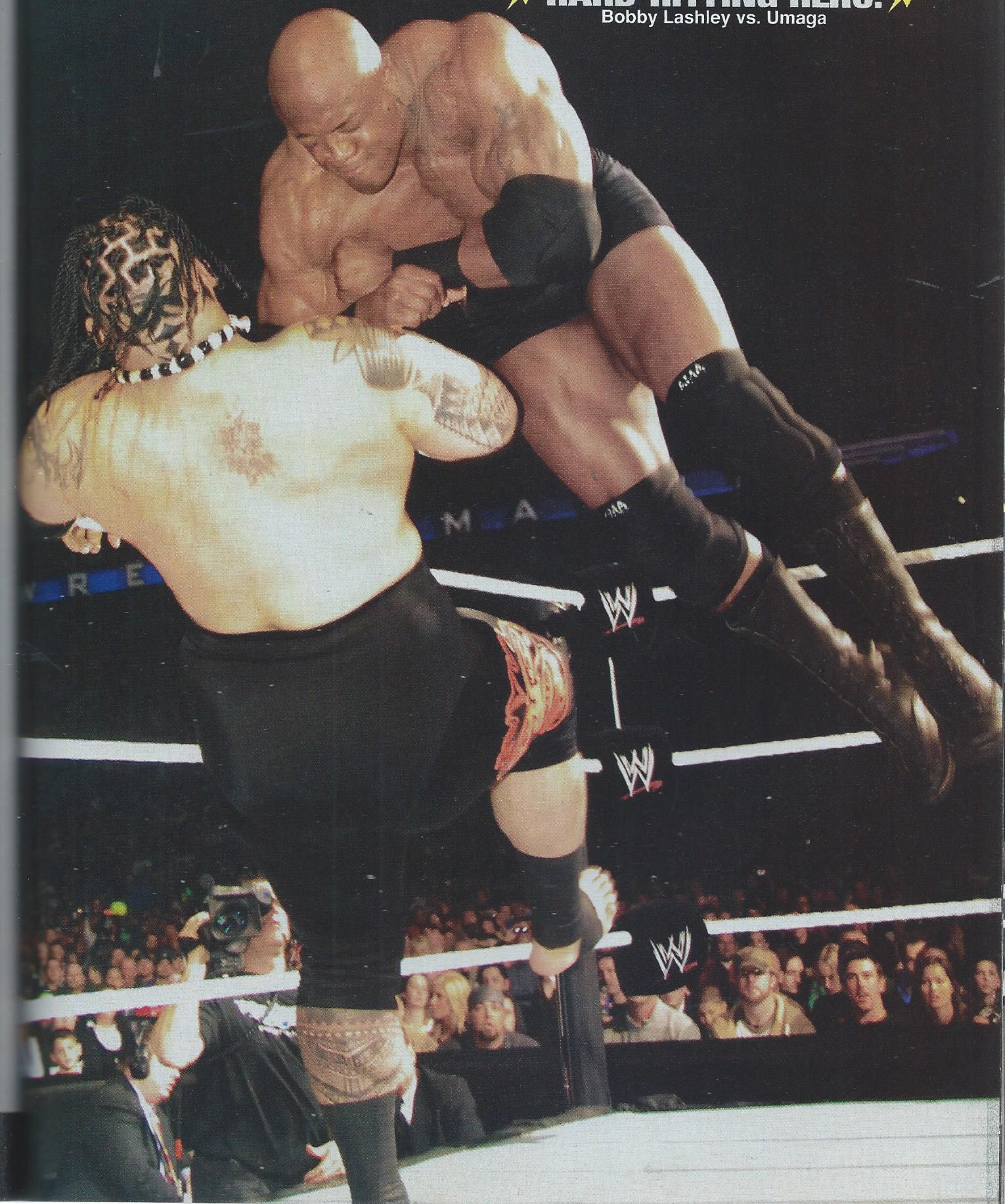
Intercontinental champion Umaga tried to use his girth to his advantage against ECW champion Bobby Lashley in the "Battle Of The Billionaires." The key question became whether Lashley's power could overcome the sheer size of Umaga.



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⚡ **HARD-HITTING HERO!** ⚡
Bobby Lashley vs. Umaga



Shane then took off his button-down shirt to reveal a referee shirt underneath. He knelt down to count the three for Umaga, but an angry Austin suddenly pulled him out of the ring. "Stone-Cold" whipped Shane into

the ring steps, then re-entered the ring. There he was met with another Samoan spike.

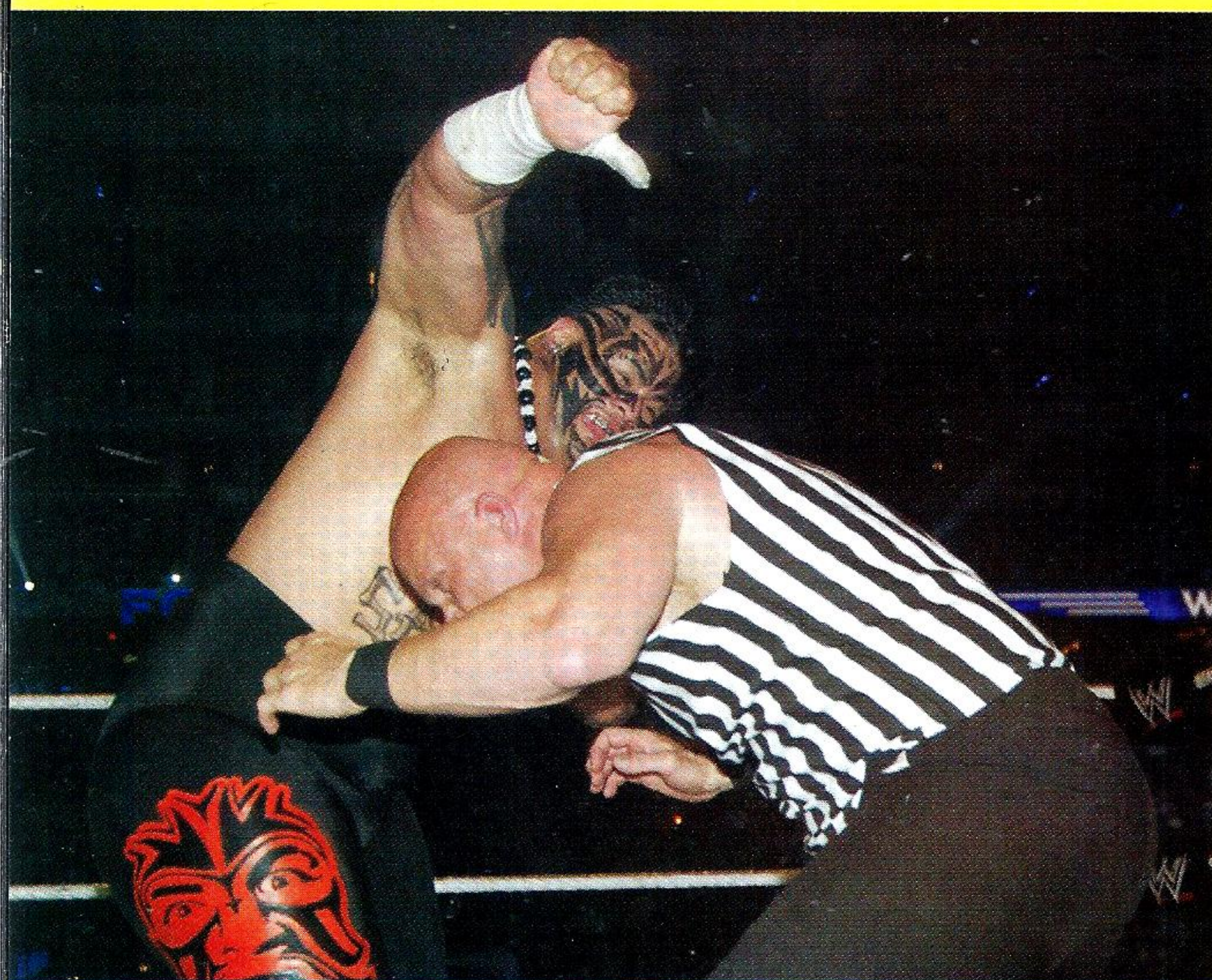
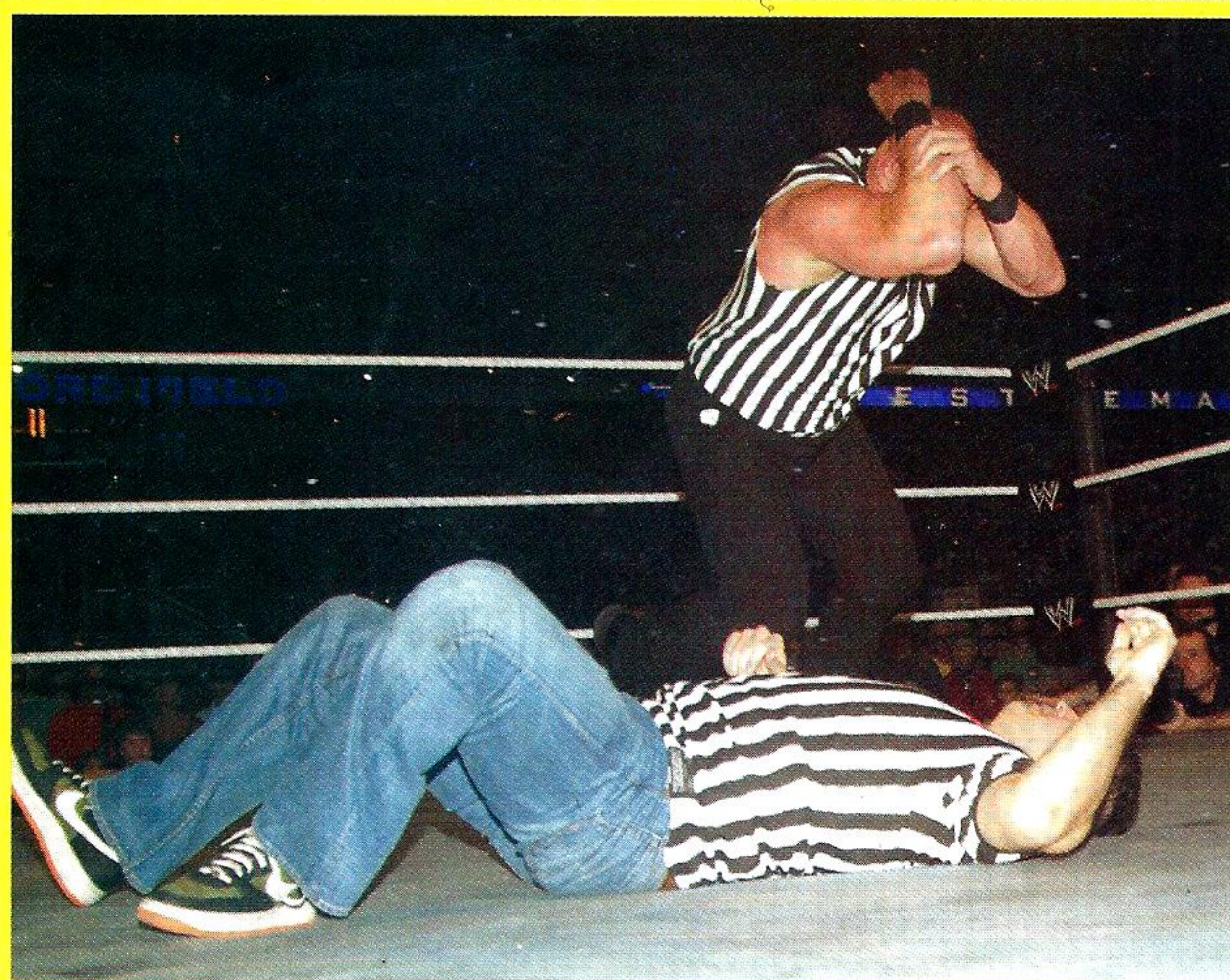
Finally, The Donald had enough. Outside the ring, the real estate tycoon nailed Vince with a clothesline and a series of punches. The crowd rejoiced as Austin entered the ring for a third time, delivering a stunner to a bewildered Umaga. Before Umaga could fully stand, Lashley leveled him with a spear. Austin counted to three, and the barbershop theatrics began.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE:

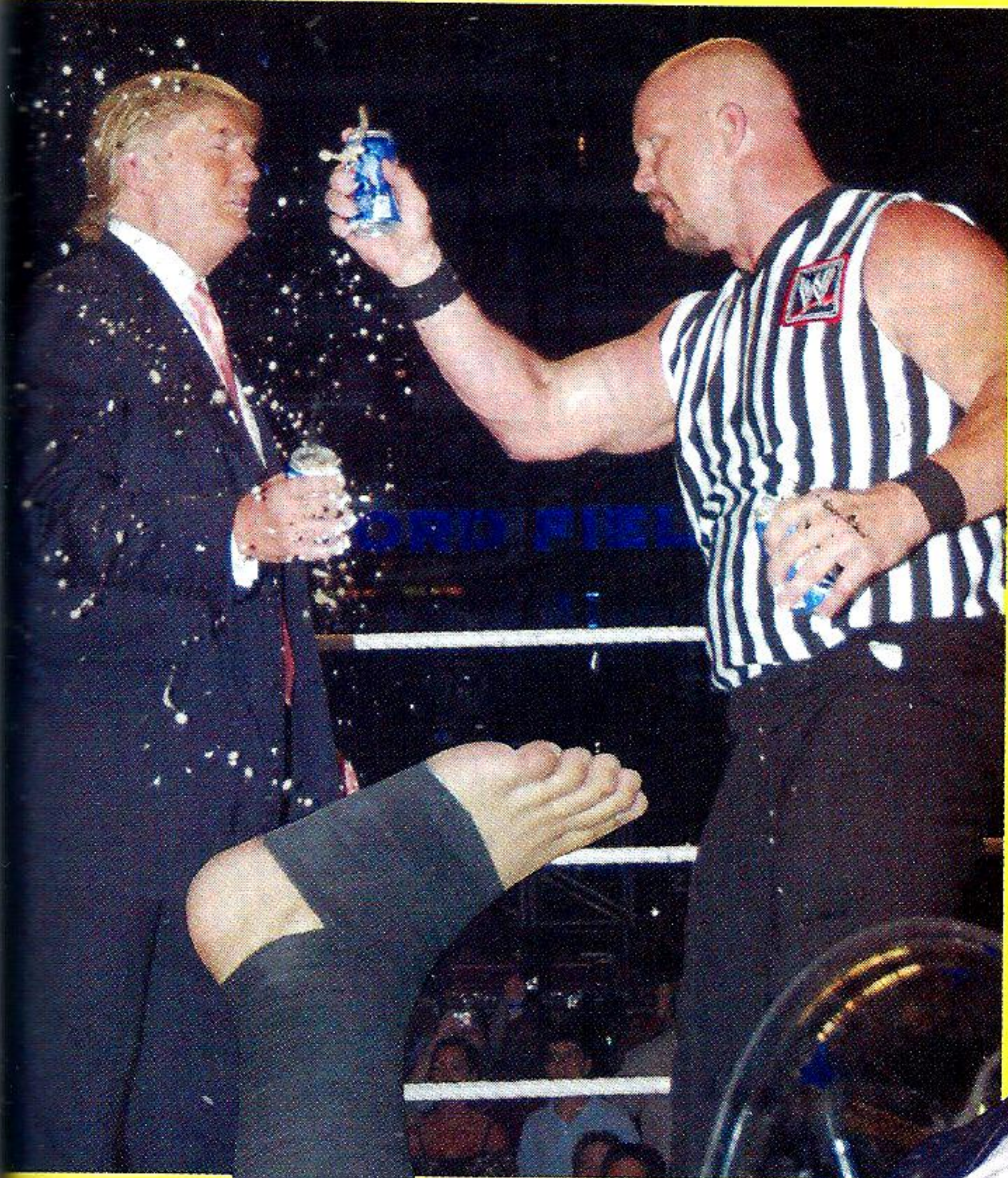
First and foremost, Vince McMahon is now even closer to being the Lex Luthor of WWE. His new bald dome will surely figure into storylines for weeks to come. Of course, McMahon secretly will love any publicity that comes with his new look, despite what he might say on camera.

While Trump's involvement guaranteed a vast amount of mainstream exposure for WrestleMania, the match itself suffered because of the theatrics surrounding it. Austin, although he was only the special referee, was given the star's entrance. Even in the graphic for the match, Umaga and Lashley were faded into the background, behind "Stone-Cold" and the two billionaires. Essentially, Lashley vs. Umaga lived up to its "Battle Of The Billionaires" moniker, as it had very little to do with the wrestlers themselves.

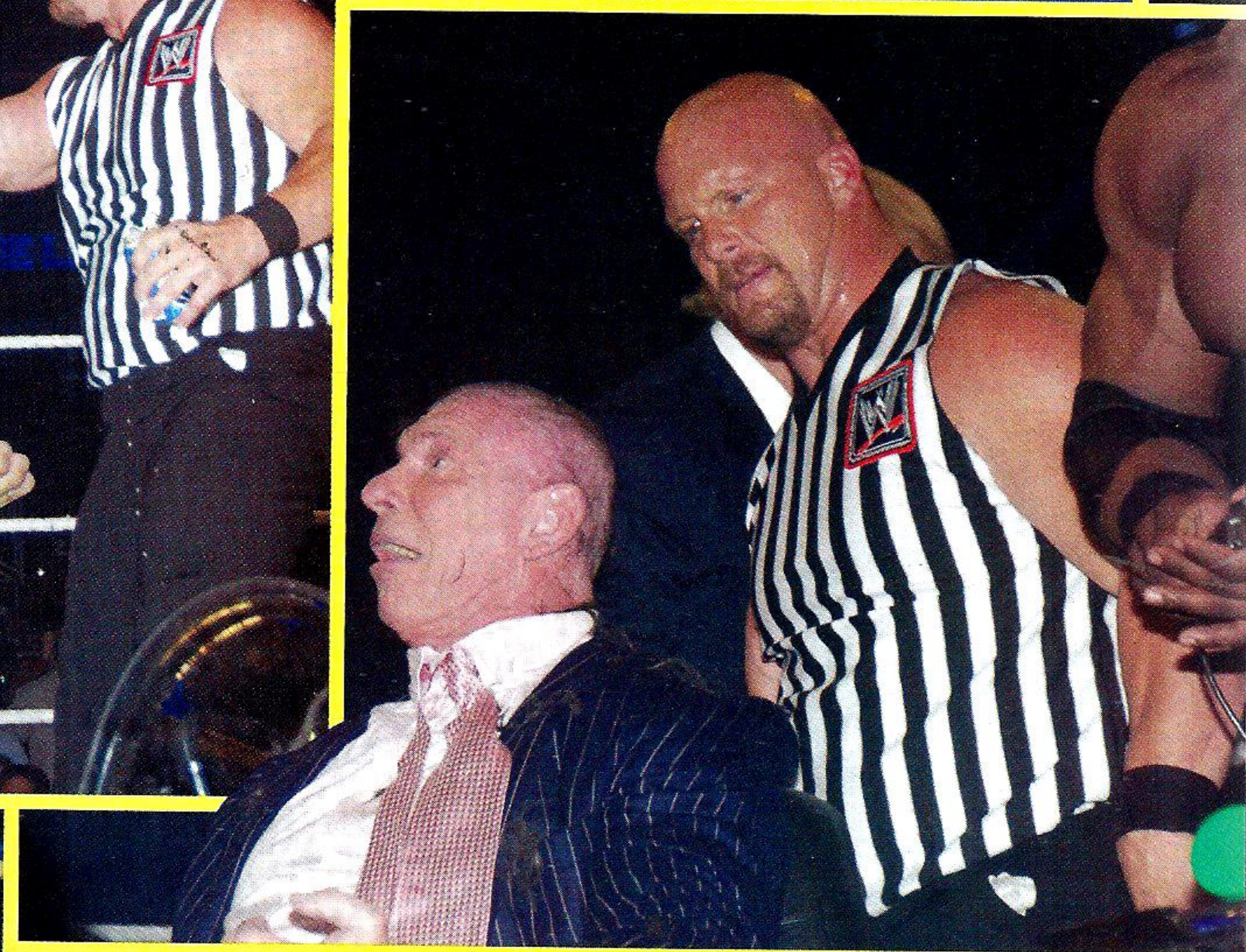
If Lashley and Umaga are supposed to be the future of the company, why were they not the focal points of the match? Why did Austin receive most of the post-match spotlight when Lashley is the man who needs to be established as a star? Austin delivered two stunners while the ECW champ's most important contribution was chasing McMahon down the entrance ramp. Does WWE really have faith in Lashley to be a player in its future? If so, he should have been given a spot of his own on the card, rather than being part of more Austin-McMahon rehash.



As expected, special referee Steve Austin turned out to be an important player in the match. Austin didn't hesitate to lay out faux referee Shane McMahon to restore order (top). When Umaga jabbed Austin with a Samoan spike, Vince McMahon knew he had a better chance of keeping his hair (above).



Donald Trump and Steve Austin were in the mood to celebrate after Lashley's win over Umaga. Austin gave Trump a "Steve-weiser" ... just moments before dropping The Donald with a billion-dollar stunner.



Would you trust a "Rattlesnake" as your barber? McMahon had no choice in the matter, as Donald Trump permitted Austin to help in the cutting of the WWE chairman's hair. At least "Stone-Cold" had plenty of experience in shaving heads.

Lashley makes sure to hook Umaga's leg as Austin counts to three. It was Umaga's first loss since losing to Raw World champion John Cena in January, and it resulted in one of the most humiliating experiences of Mr. McMahon's life.

⚡ MELINA vs. ASHLEY MASSARO ⚡

HOW WE GOT HERE: For the fourth year in a row, a WWE Diva posed for *Playboy* in conjunction with WrestleMania. This year, the Diva was Smackdown's Ashley Massaro. Melina was incensed because a *Playboy* centerfold was getting more attention than the WWE women's champion. Ashley took exception and challenged Melina for her women's title. Melina accepted the challenge, and the bout was later turned into a "Lumberjill" match.

WHAT WENT DOWN: With just about every Diva in the company at ringside, Melina and Ashley squared off for the women's championship. The match began with Ashley throwing a few punches, which knocked Melina to the outside. A few of the lumberjills quickly tossed her back into the ring. Ashley tried to maintain

the upper hand, but was tossed into the corner. Melina then went to work on Ashley with a few punches and a boot to the throat. Ashley broke free and reciprocated with some punches and a boot of her own.

Melina tripped Ashley and regained the advantage. The women's champion launched a varied offense, alternating between chokes and technical maneuvers. Even after a modified bow and arrow and a giant swing, Ashley seized control of the match-up again. The *Playboy* cover girl seemed to have Melina right where she wanted her. Ashley climbed to the top rope and went for her favorite finishing move, a flying elbowdrop, but came up short.

Melina gained only a two-count. Shortly after, Ashley attempted a rolling reverse cradle, which was countered by Melina for the pinfall. Immediately following the match, the lumberjills filled the ring and a brawl broke out. Melina and a few other heels slipped away before any real damage could be done.


WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE: A Diva in *Playboy* is certainly a big publicity deal for WWE, and having former models on the roster appeals to the coveted young male demographic. Unfortunately, the hiring of more non-wrestlers to fill wrestling roles has led to a steady decline in the quality of WWE's women's division. Mickie James, who had a very memorable match with Trish Stratus at WrestleMania 22, was relegated to the position of lumberjill. Victoria, WWE's most seasoned Diva, was also a lumberjill.

While WWE's Divas are given only sporadic TV time, there is no shortage of ability or potential in the women's division. Melina is a very skilled in-ring competitor. So, too, is Jillian Hall. The women's division can be and has been a very entertaining part of the WWE product through the years. The key is in making sure that, like WWE's other divisions, the wrestlers receive adequate training and are passionate about the business. After that, it's all about giving the girls time to shine.



Ashley Massaro tore into WWE women's champion Melina at the opening bell, but it turned out that good looks and sheer aggression were not enough to dethrone the devious Diva.




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SWINGING PLAYBOY COVERGIRL!
Melina vs. Ashley Massaro

⚡ JOHN CENA vs. SHAWN MICHAELS ⚡

HOW WE GOT HERE: After a strong showing at the Royal Rumble, Shawn Michaels told the world that he deserved a shot at the Raw World title. If Undertaker didn't choose John Cena as his opponent at WrestleMania, then he wanted the shot. Edge and Randy Orton made the same request, although it was Michaels who ended up earning the shot. On the

road to WrestleMania, "The Heartbreak Kid" and Cena won the Raw World tag team championship. There was concern that HBK would superkick the champ at any given moment in the weeks leading up to their match. Michaels confirmed those suspicions, finally delivering sweet chin music on the March 26 edition of Raw.



Michaels unleashes his famous flying forearm, which usually signals a strong HBK comeback. Cena failed to counter most of Michaels' most predictable moves, but his will to win—and his own improving skill set—proved to be enough in this match.



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⚡ "YOU CAN'T SEE ME!" ⚡

John Cena vs. Shawn Michaels



WHAT WENT DOWN: The match began as a back and forth striking contest. Cena threw his clubbing right hooks. Michaels unloaded on Cena with a barrage of stiff chops before tossing him to the outside. "The Heartbreak Kid" then went high risk, taking Cena into the announce table with a moonsault plancha. The challenger remained in control, swinging his opponent's knee into the ringpost.

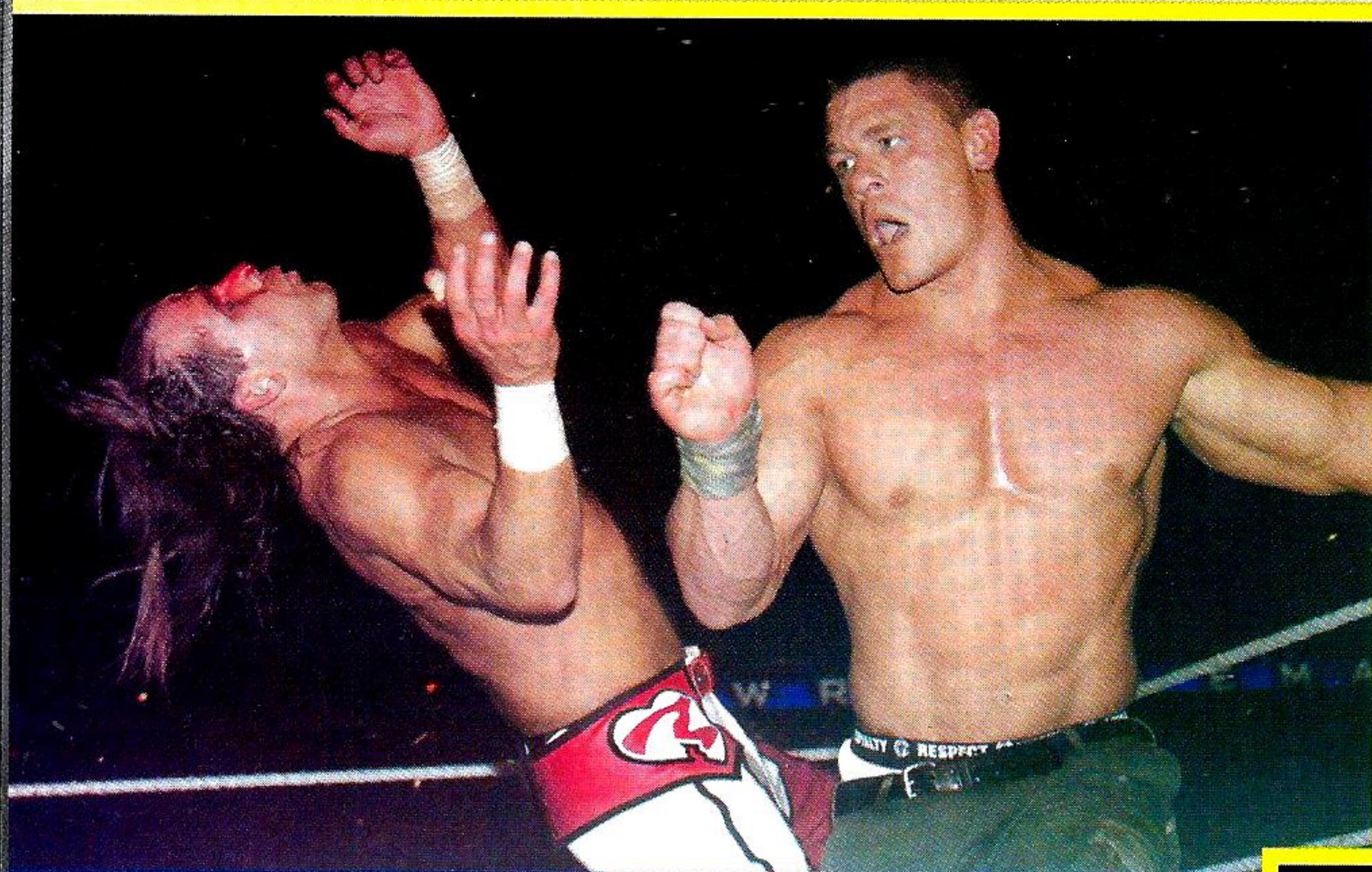
HBK was unable to capitalize on the leg injury, however, even after picking away at Cena's limb for several

minutes. Cena regained his strength, dodging a Michaels shoulderblock. Michaels' head met the ringpost and busted wide open. With a new vigor, the champ hit the five-knuckle shuffle before attempting the FU. Michaels dodged the FU—not once, but twice—within the span of a minute. He also managed to superkick referee Mike Chioda straight into dreamland.

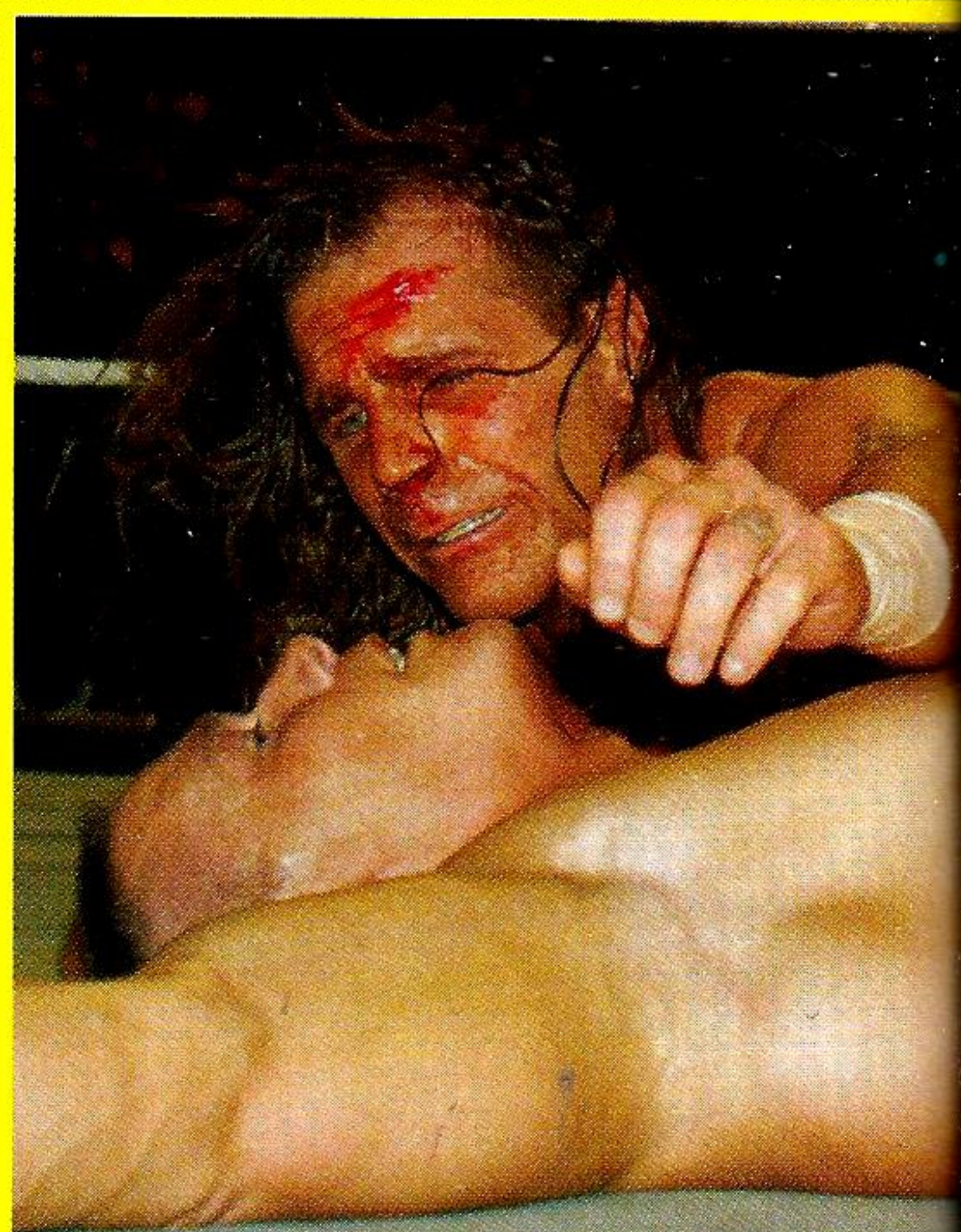
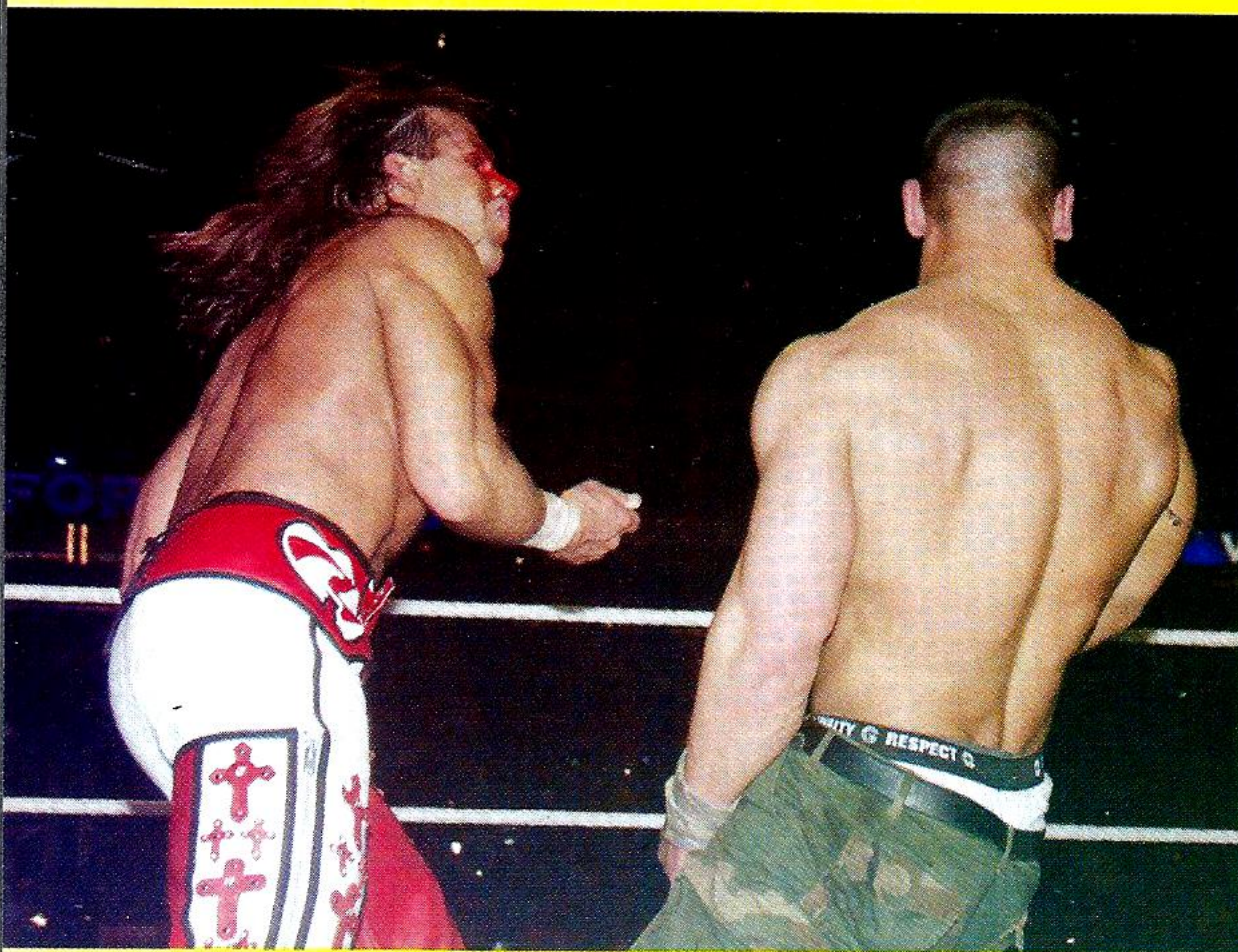
With no referee to make a 10-count, the action once again left the ring. Once outside, Michaels went old school. He mounted the ring steps, dragging his opponent with him. With little strength to fight back, Cena fell victim to a vicious piledriver on the ring steps. Cena's head became a bloody mess.

Michaels laid the champ in the ring, and then went for a cover, prompting a second official, Jack Doan, to make the two-count. Eventually, Cena recovered and mounted another offensive. After the previous failed attempts, Cena finally executed the FU. To the shock of many in attendance, "The Showstopper" kicked out.

HBK wasn't going to be pinned, though, and he didn't plan to submit, either. Cena placed Michaels in the STFU, only for him to reach



The style and tempo of the John Cena-Shawn Michaels main event at WrestleMania changed many times over the course of 30 minutes, but no exchange illustrated the growing resentment between the two men as strongly as Cena wobbling Michaels with right hands (above) and Michaels responding in kind (below).



As the match wore on, Michaels had to summon extra-human willpower to compensate for his growing fatigue. Ultimately, Cena won the test of endurance at WrestleMania. Perhaps the Raw World champion is now "the most resilient competitor in WWE."

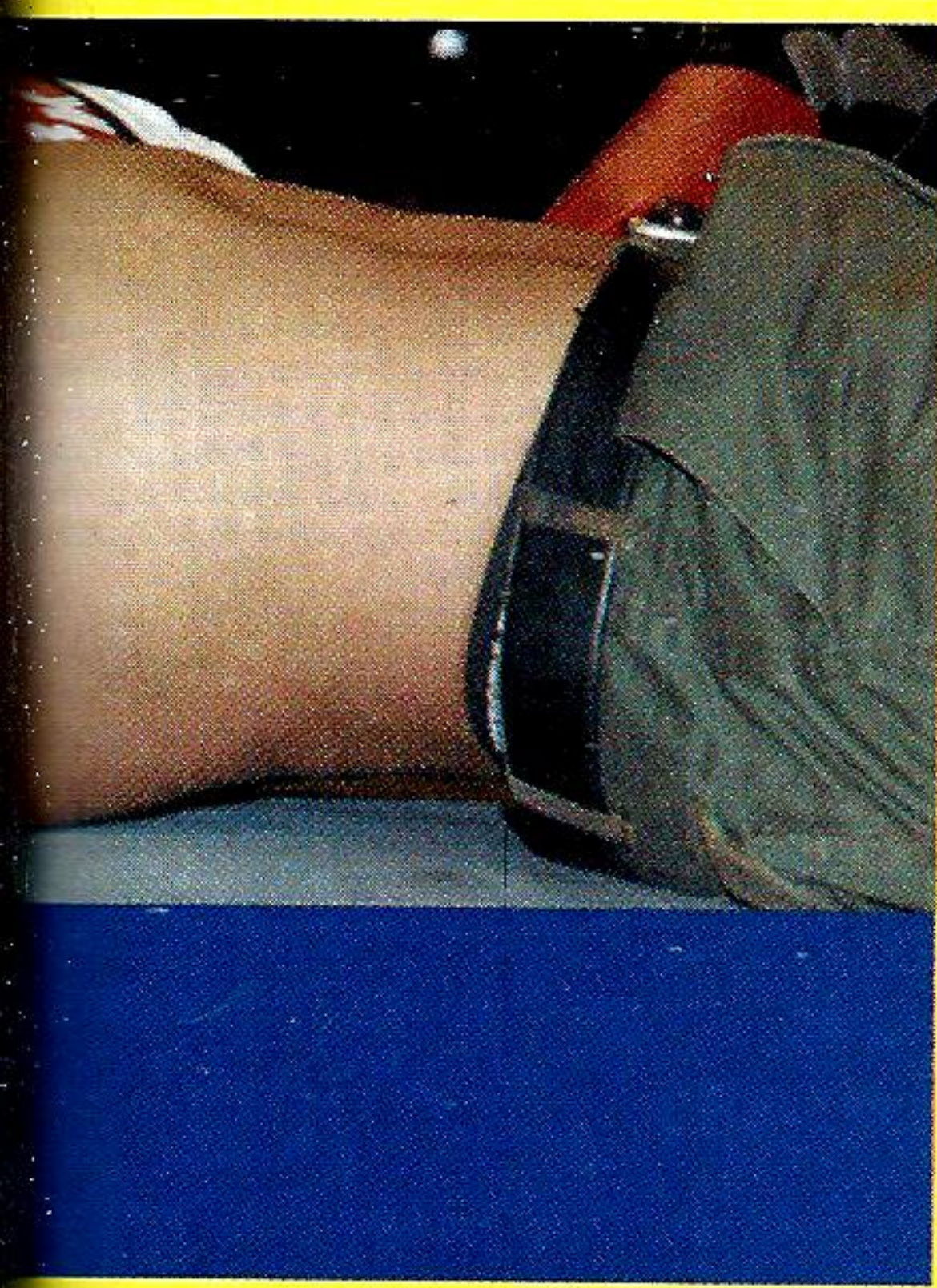
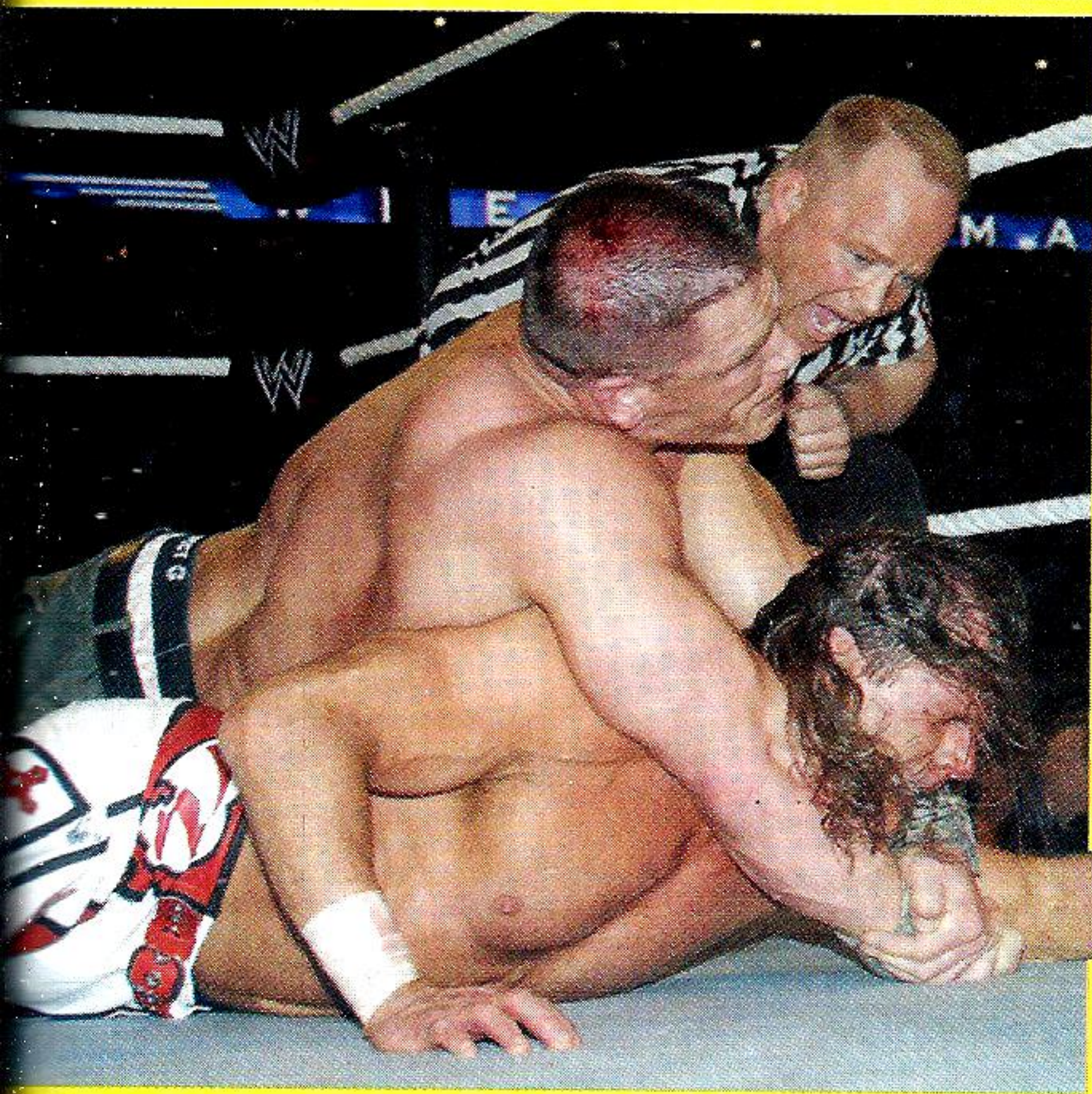
the bottom rope moments later. Michaels reached his feet and, with a sudden strength, landed the superkick. Cena didn't quit, either, as the referee's hand struck the mat only twice. Neither man was going to stay down easily, but, after a grueling 30-minute battle, Cena locked in an STFU that even Michaels couldn't escape. "The Heartbreak Kid" had no choice but to tap out in the glaring WrestleMania spotlight.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR WWE: Cena has beaten the best WWE has to offer. Having gone through many of the company's heels, Michaels was the perfect challenger to test his mettle. The crowd was somewhat divided, probably in favor of Michaels. This isn't a surprise, nor should it be a strike against Cena. Most audiences would support "The Showstopper" against anyone he faces, fan favorite or heel.

In this match, Cena stepped out of his comfort

zone. He was in a match in which he wasn't necessarily playing the role of the strong-yet-sympathetic hero. It was a different kind of situation, and it felt like it. Possibly, a congratulatory handshake following the match would have been a more gratifying way to end the evening. This doesn't take away from the match itself, however, and we could still see that handshake at a later date.

HBK, like Chris Benoit and The Undertaker, has the ability to bring out the best in his fellow wrestlers. At WrestleMania 23, he did just that. What's next for Shawn Michaels? A long-awaited run on Smackdown may be just the trick for him while Cena has a long list of challengers—from Randy Orton to Johnny Nitro—with whom he has yet to feud extensively.



"The Heartbreak Kid" tried to resist submitting to Cena's STFU (above), but, as a 23-year veteran, Michaels knew there was no escape. It is ironic that Cena is often criticized for his technical ability, yet he has won many matches with this traditional submission hold.



After defeating one of the greatest WWE stars of all-time, the Raw World champion must be wondering when he will finally get some respect. After all, Cena has won title matches at four consecutive WrestleManias.



Three Months Of Tragedies

OUR 10-BELL SALUTE
TO 11 WRESTLING HEROES

By Phillip Variale

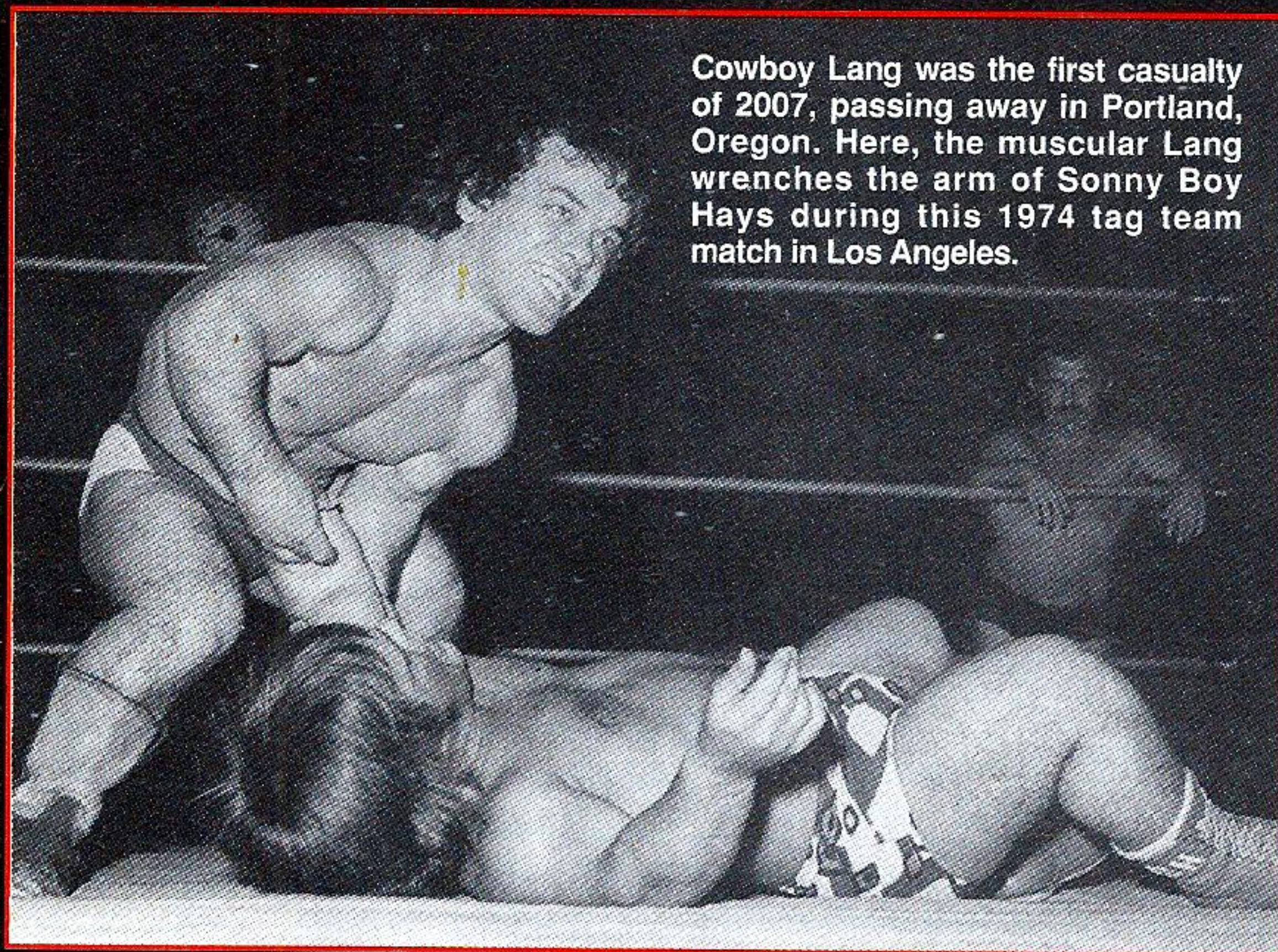
THE WRESTLING COMMUNITY suffered 11 deaths during the first three months of 2007. That is an incredible amount for such a short period of time in any profession. When reflecting upon how these men lived and died, one is reminded of the diverse and wide-ranging nature of our industry.

Consider some of the distinguished credentials of these men: Among them were a U.S. Marine, a professional football player, a health club entrepreneur, an Olympic competitor, a political activist and confidant of a former President, a professional bounty hunter, a company president, a road manager for a well-known rock band, an Aztec Warrior, and the oldest living professional wrestler.

Also consider the diverse nature of their final days: The ages of the deceased ranged from 34

to 101, the causes of death ranged from cancer to suicide, and their financial situations ranged from wealthy to near poverty. It seems as if their only common bonds were professional wrestling and a commitment to excellence. PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED is privileged to honor these gentlemen with our printed version of a 10-bell salute.

Cowboy Lang: Died on January 4. A native of Saskatchewan, Canada, Harry Lang was trained by Lord Littlebrook on his Ontario farm in 1967. Lang became one of the most well-known midget wrestlers of the 1970s and '80s, even holding the world midget title on a few occasions. After retiring from the ring in 1998, Lang fell on hard times and died from heart disease in his small Portland, Oregon, apartment at the age of 56.



Cowboy Lang was the first casualty of 2007, passing away in Portland, Oregon. Here, the muscular Lang wrenches the arm of Sonny Boy Hays during this 1974 tag team match in Los Angeles.

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Bam Bam Bigelow: Died on January 19. Born in 1961, Bigelow was a professional bounty hunter before breaking into wrestling in 1986. He won titles in the Memphis and World Class territories before joining the WWF in 1987. Bigelow's biggest match occurred in 1995, a losing effort against NFL great Lawrence Taylor at WrestleMania XI. Bigelow held the ECW heavyweight title, the WCW World tag team title with Dallas Page, and the IWGP tag team title with Big Van Vader. For someone with such a tremendous career, he suffered a tragic ending, as he went from earning \$1.2-million during his best year to living on Social Security disability income when he died.

Doug Gentry: Died on January 26. Gentry began taping ECW shows for the company's "Fancam" releases.

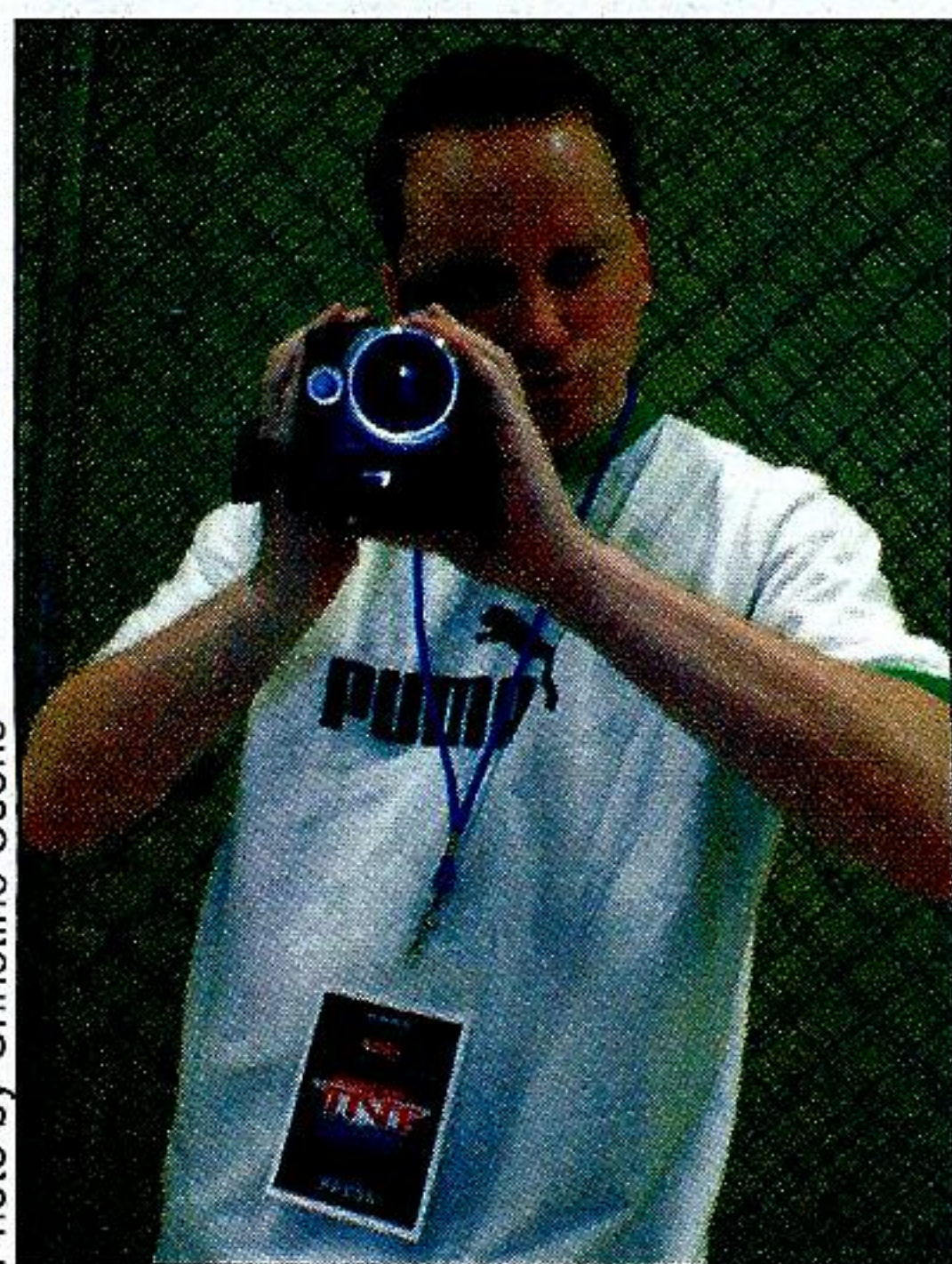


Photo by Christine Coons

Doug Gentry first gained prominence for his handy camerawork in ECW, and then went on to lend his many talents to Ring of Honor and other independent promotions. He even served as ROH president for a brief while.

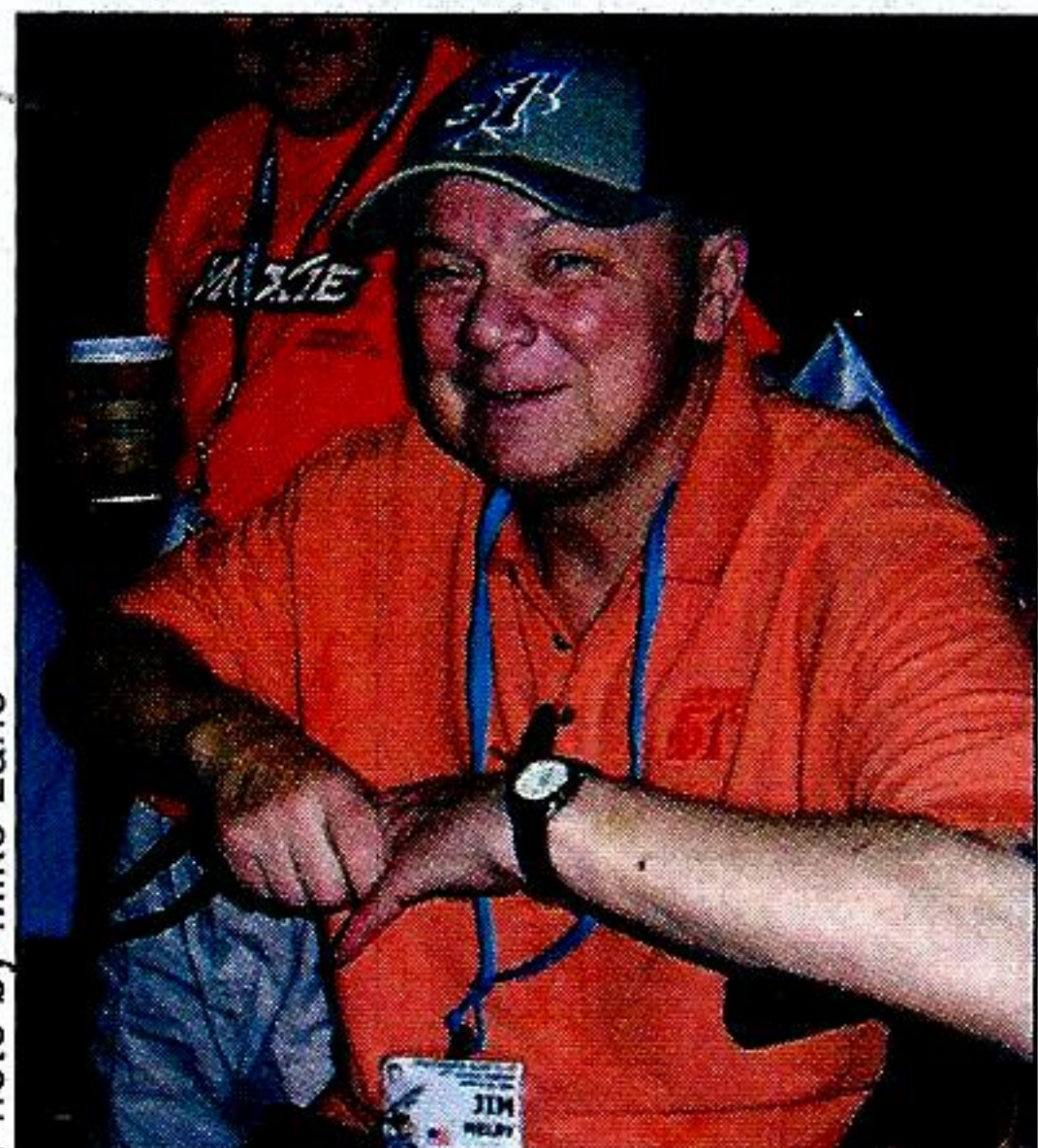


Photo by Mike Lano

James C. Melby was one of wrestling's top magazine writers and a respected historian. To honor his work, the International Wrestling Institute and Museum gave him the appropriately named James C. Melby Award in 2006.

After ECW closed down, Gentry helped RF Video owner Rob Feinstein found Ring of Honor in February 2002. With ROH, Gentry was a jack-of-all-trades: in charge of the production and video editing, handling ringside camerawork, and performing commentary on home releases. In March 2004, he became president of both RF Video and Ring of Honor. However, when Ring of Honor broke ties with RF Video later that year, Gentry remained with RF Video. Gentry died of complications from a bacterial infection in his heart at age 34.

James C. Melby: Died on February 10. A Minnesota native, Melby began writing about pro wrestling at age 15 when he started the *Matmania* newsletter. He went on to work for Norman Kietzer Publishing, where he served as the editor of maga-

zines such as *The Wrestling News*, *Wrestling Revue*, *Wrestling Monthly*, and *The Ring's Wrestling Magazine*. He also published programs for the NWA, the WWF, and the AWA. Melby also wrote for *Billboard*, managed record stores, and served as road manager for several bands, including Husker Du. Suffering from diabetes since 1971, he had a kidney removed and a leg amputated before passing away at age 57.

Mike Awesome: Died on February 17. Michael Alfonso grew up in Tampa, Florida, with ties to the wrestling business. His father's sister married Hulk Hogan's brother. After being trained by Steve Keirn, Awesome made his debut in 1989 and formed a tag team with his cousin, Horace Hogan. He shot to fame when he won the ECW World title in 1999, and eventually entered WCW, where he was saddled with poor gimmicks such as "That '70s Guy," "The Career Killer," and "The Fat Chick Thriller." He won the WWF hardcore title and wrestled for TNA before retiring from the ring. He was working as a real estate agent when he was found hanging in his home, a victim of suicide. He was 42.

Allen Coage: Died on March 6. Born in Brooklyn in 1943, he represented the United States judo team at the 1976 Olympic Games. He broke into professional wrestling with New Japan and eventually settled in Calgary's Stampede promotion, where he wrestled as Bad News Allen. He wrestled for the WWWF briefly during the late-1970s. He was known as Bad News Brown when he returned in the late-'80s, and feuded with Hulk Hogan, Bret Hart, Randy Savage, Roddy Piper, and Jake Roberts.

Ray Stern: Died on March 6. Named Walter Bookbinder at birth, this Brooklyn native started wrestling in 1950. He eventually used his mother's maiden name of Stern and adopted the nickname "Thunder." After his wrestling career ended, he opened the first co-ed gym and the first health club with a playroom, which provided a safe place for children so their parents could exercise. His health club business turned out to be very lucrative. He died at age 74.

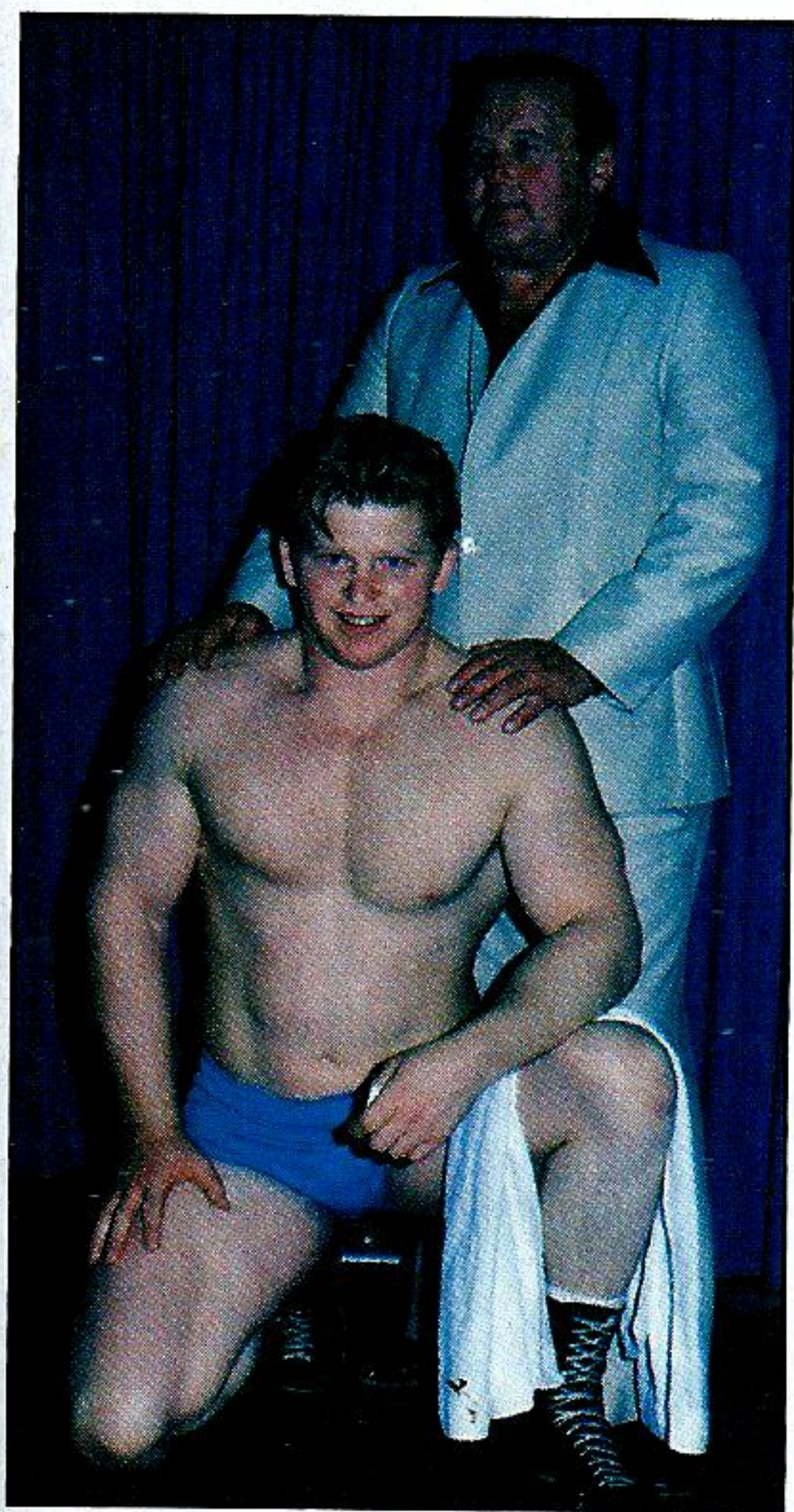


Photo by Mike Lano

Ray Stern (pictured with his daughter) had a passion for physical fitness that served him well in pro wrestling and in private business. He opened the first coed gym in the U.S. and also earned a good living through aviation and real estate.

Ernie Ladd: Died on March 10. Born in 1938, in Rayville, Louisiana, Ladd played in 112 consecutive American Football League games for teams such as the San Diego Chargers, Houston Oilers, and Kansas City Chiefs. It was during his football career that Ladd debuted in wrestling, serving as a guest referee. In 1969, after being plagued by knee problems, he ended his football career and began wrestling full-time. Ladd went on to become one of wrestling's biggest stars of the 1970s and one of the most respected bookers of the '80s. After retiring from wrestling, he became an active member of the Republican Party and a close friend of the Bush family. He was charted inductee in the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame in 1996. Ladd had battled cancer since 2004, first in his colon, then later in his stomach and bones.

Arnold Skoaland: Died March 13. A native of White Plains, New York, Skoaland served in the U.S. Marines during World War II. He broke into professional wrestling at age 19 and had a run in Georgia under the name of Bobby Weaver. While in the WWF, "The Golden Boy"



Arnold Skoaland was a mid-carder in the old WWF, but he is best remembered as the manager of Bruno Sammartino and later Bob Backlund (pictured). He couldn't have predicted how Backlund's white towel would become a source of controversy.

Angel Azteca: Died on March 18. Azteca is best remembered as an EMLL star during that promotion's television glory days of the late-1980s. A perennial favorite, Azteca teamed with Atlantis to win the Mexican National tag team title on two occasions.

Azteca was known for his silver and black mask and Aztec warrior headpiece, which he lost to Arkangel de la Muerte in late-2003. On March 18, he teamed with Pinsky Jr. and Demonio Rojo against Imperio Dorado, Rebelde Punk, and Atlantis in Campeche. Atlantis hit Azteca with a low blow to win the match for his team. Afterward, Azteca mentioned that he was feeling ill, so he was rushed to a local hospital, where he suffered a fatal heart attack. Azteca was 43 years old.

Abe Coleman: Died on March 28. Born in Zychlin, Poland, Coleman arrived in the U.S. in 1923, avoiding the fate of other members of his family, who were later killed in the Holocaust. He debuted in 1928 and was best known for his outstanding physique. Although Coleman stood only 5'3", he boasted 18-inch biceps and an 18-inch neck. Nicknamed the "Hebrew Hercules" and the "Jewish Tarzan," he was a top draw in the Northeast during the Great Depression. Coleman also claimed to have invented the dropkick, stating he was inspired by kangaroos while on a tour of Australia in 1930. He retired from wrestling in 1958 after a three-decade career.

Before Coleman died in a nursing home in Queens, New York, he was believed to be the oldest living pro wrestler. □

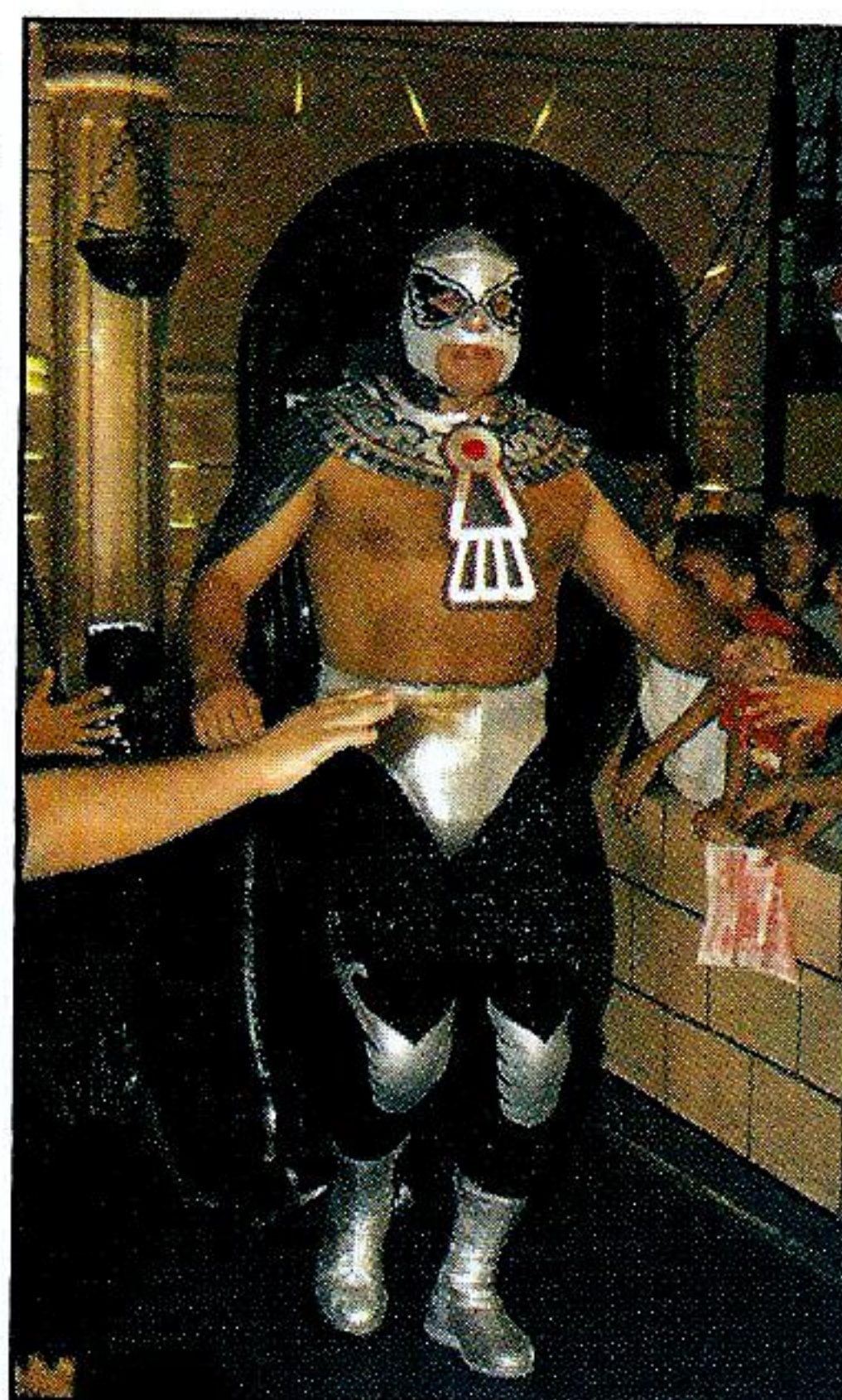
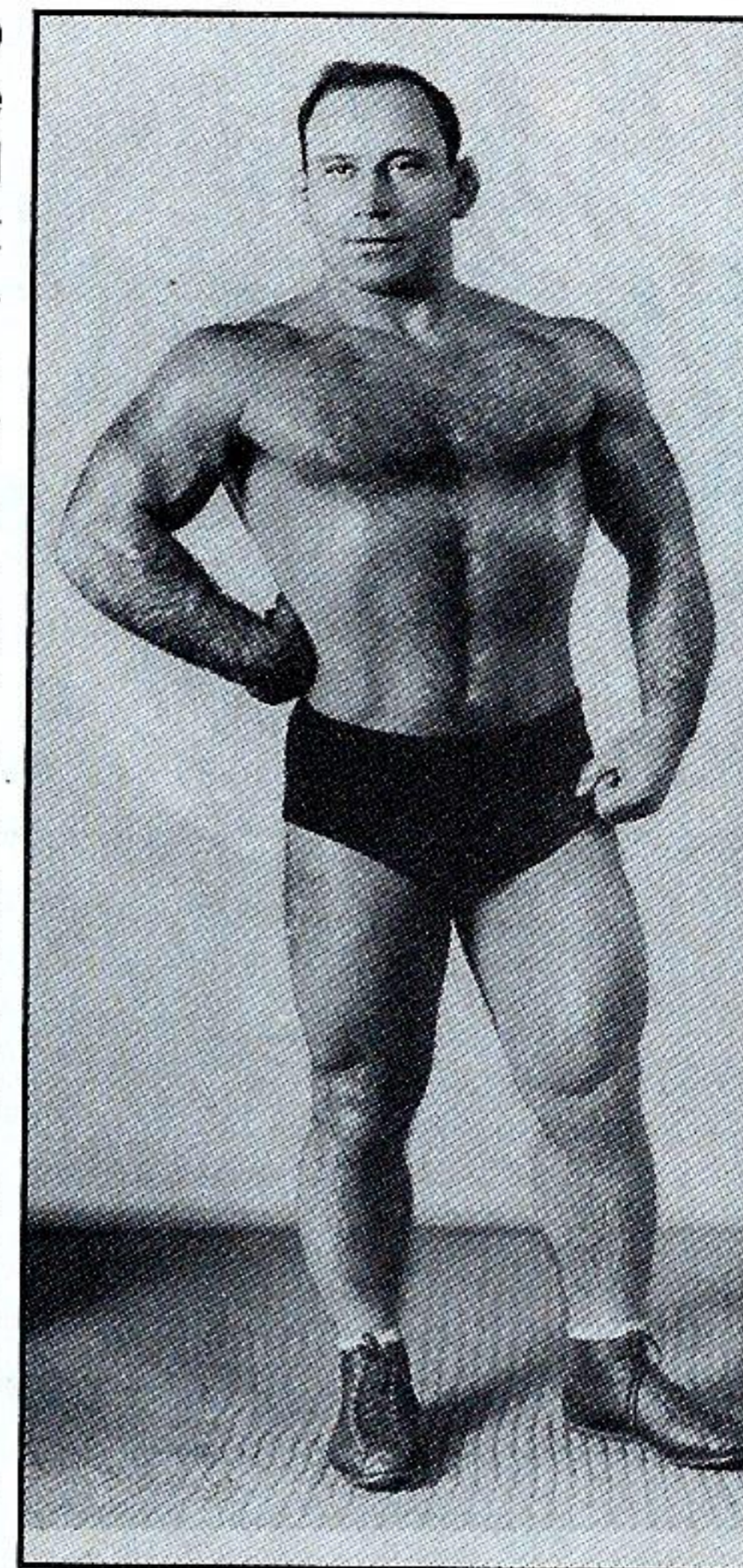


Photo by Dorothy Lee

Angel Azteca, one of the most popular wrestlers during EMLL's hottest period in the 1980s, died of a heart attack shortly after a bout in Mexico. He was only 43 years old.



Abe Coleman was introduced to wrestling by promoter Rudy Miller, who saw the Poland native work out in a Brooklyn gym. Coleman went on to have a successful career at a time when Jewish athletes weren't always welcome in the business.



OVER
HERE.

OVER
THERE

WRESTLING GOES GLOBAL!

By Dan Murphy

"The flattening process is happening at warp speed and directly or indirectly touching a lot more people on the planet at once ... The faster and broader this transition to a new era, the more likely is the potential for disruption, as opposed to an orderly transfer of power from the old winners to the new winners."

—Thomas L. Friedman, author,
The World Is Flat: A Brief History Of The 21st Century

THOSE WHO FOLLOW international relations have called Thomas Friedman a guru. With his landmark 2005 book, *The World Is Flat*, Friedman opened the eyes of many to a simple truth: The world has changed over the past 10 years.

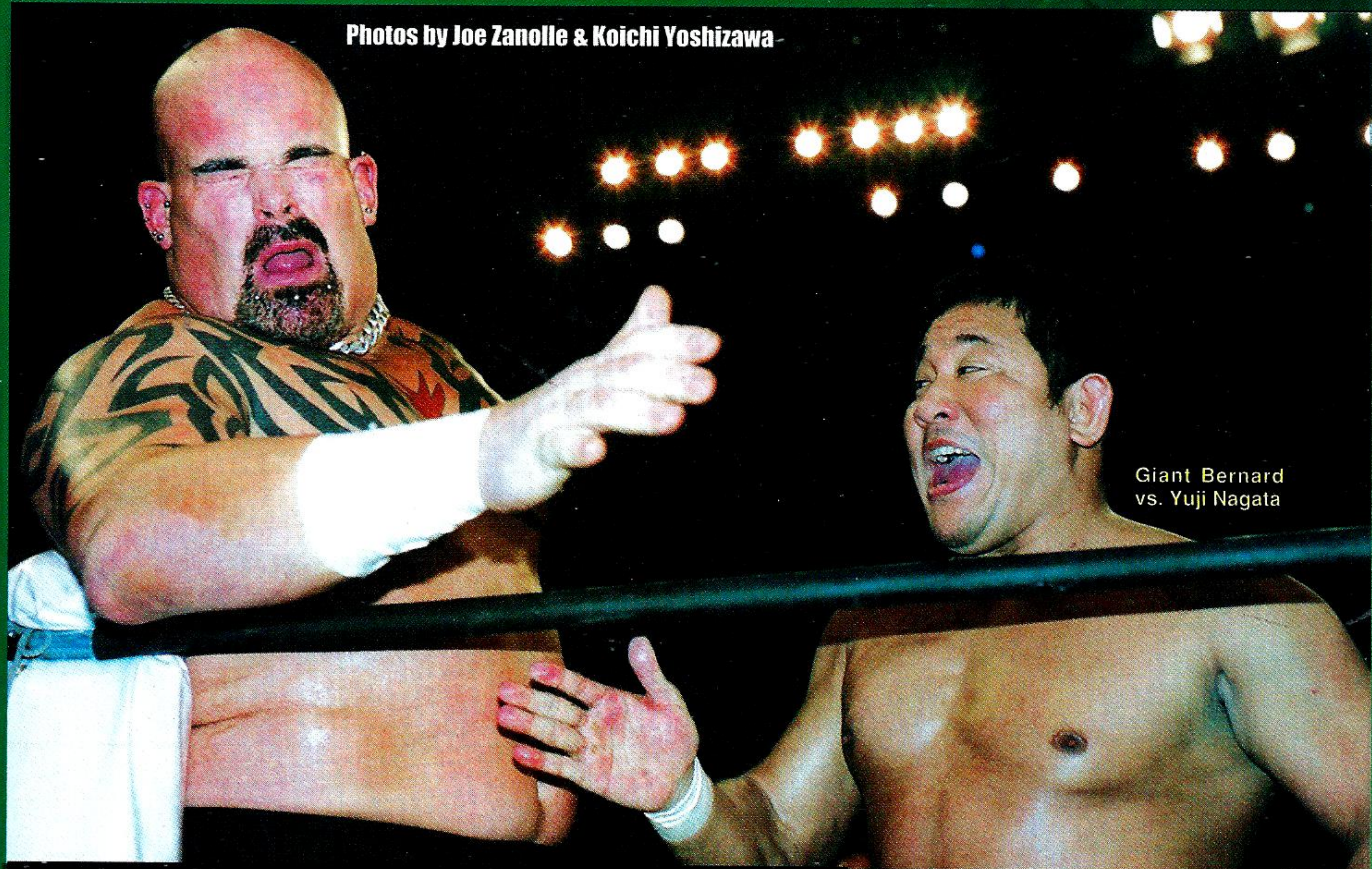
According to Friedman's basic thesis, the world is becoming "flat" in that the competitive playing field between industrial and emerging market nations is leveling. American companies are outsourcing jobs overseas while capitalizing on lower overhead and better communications capabilities through new technology. The Internet, Friedman says, "wires the whole world together, and, without anyone really

planning it, made Bangalore a suburb of Boston." Today, it's easier than ever to travel all over the world and communicate with virtually anyone on the planet in real time.

And it looks like this so-called flattening of the earth is having a dramatic effect on the pro wrestling landscape.

Ring of Honor is feeling a Japanese influence with Takeshi Morishima holding the promotion's singles title and the team of Nakuri Doi and Shingo reigning as tag team champions. The Great Muta recently attended TNA's Destination X pay-per-view and is reportedly attempting to broker a talent-sharing deal

Photos by Joe Zanolle & Koichi Yoshizawa

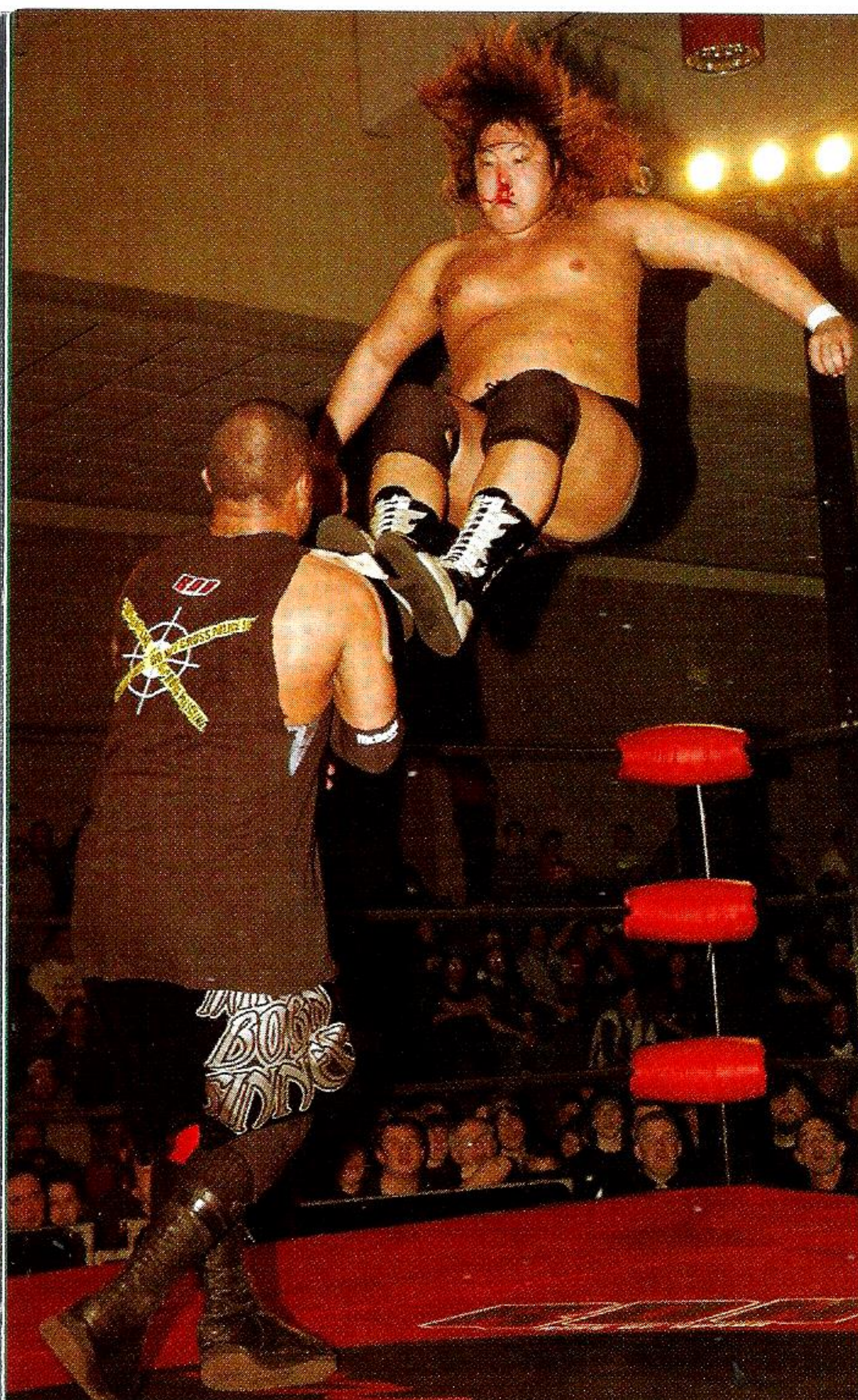


Giant Bernard
vs. Yuji Nagata

Rikishi vs.
Akebono



New ROH
champ:
Takeshi
Morishima

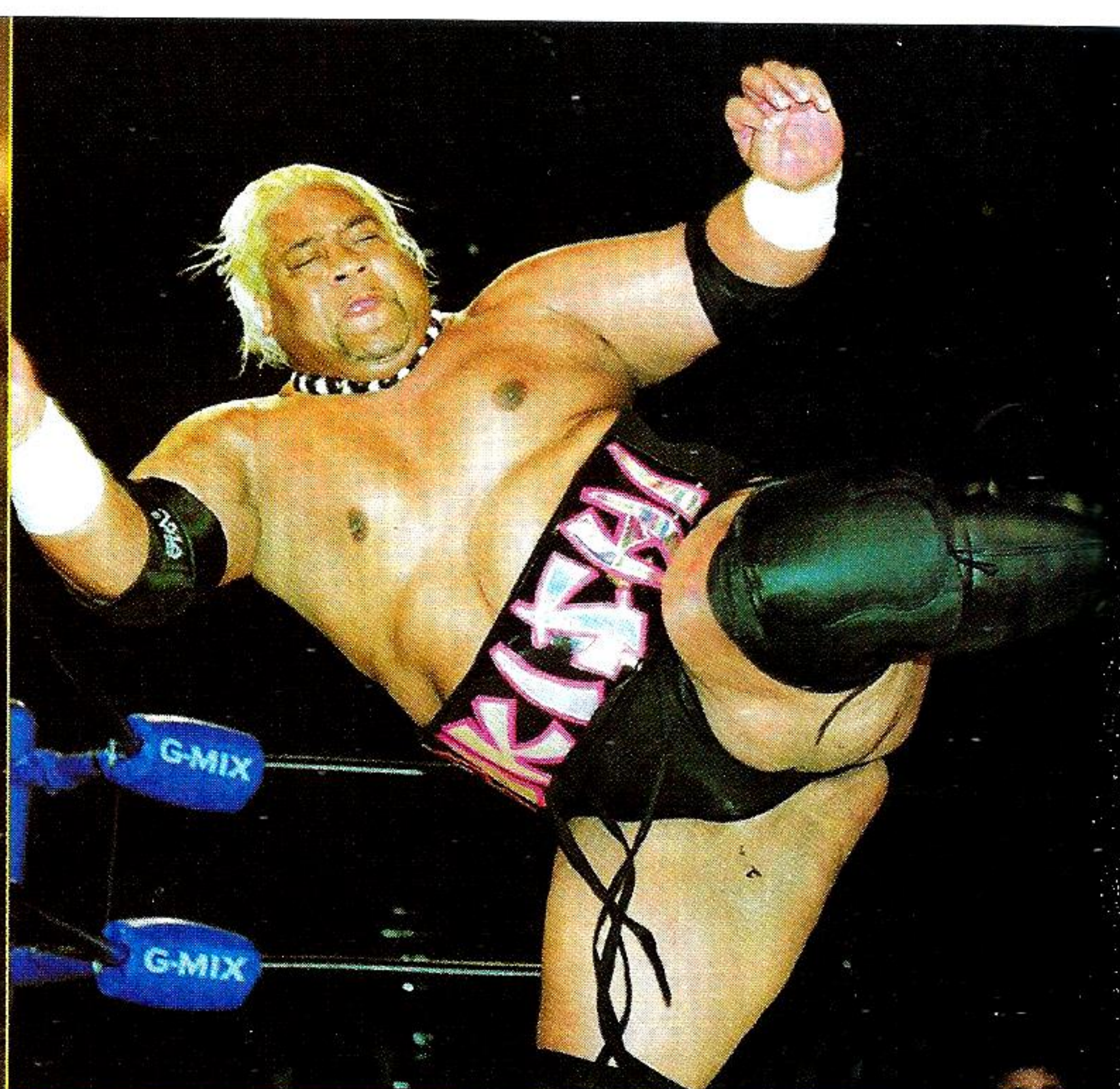


Takeshi Morishima launches into a missile dropkick against Homicide, an awesome move for a 297-pounder. Now that Morishima is the Ring of Honor champion, he is likely to defend the title in his native Japan, which will help the title gain international respectability.

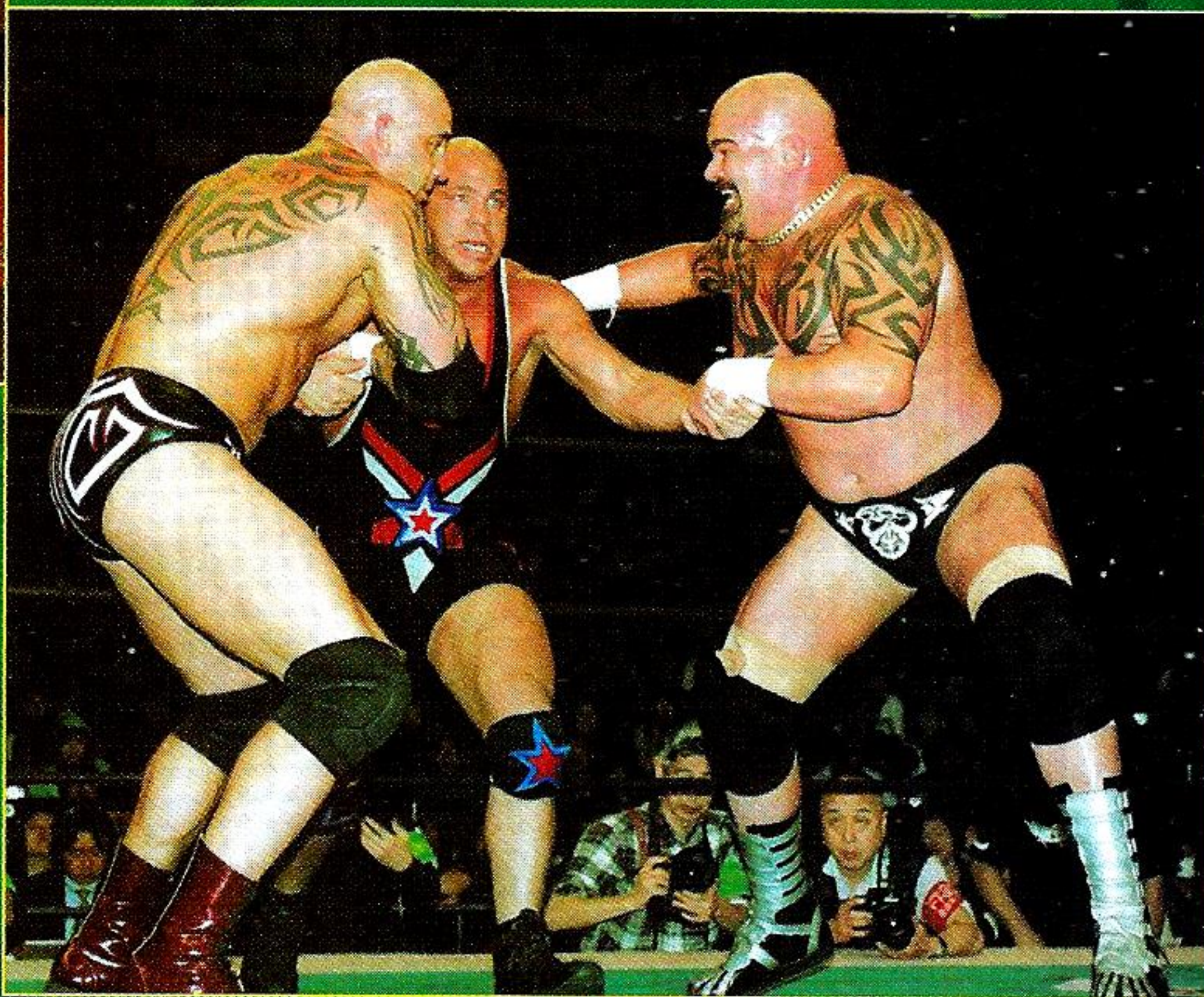
between TNA and All Japan Pro Wrestling.

Even WWE—a company that traditionally has been reluctant to showcase international talent except in comedic or stereotypical roles—has been feeling the influence of the international market. The company is reportedly considering establishing several international territories throughout the world that would feature a mixture of current WWE talent and regional prospects. WWE recently brought in masked star Mistico for a tryout. Already a top drawing card in Mexico, Mistico could become a franchise player in a potential Mexican territory.

If you're concerned that the U.S. may be on the wrong end of an unfavorable balance of trade, fret not. There are plenty of American wrestlers finding new success beyond our borders. Kurt Angle is the latest *gaijin* to get the red-carpet treatment in Japan, following in the footsteps of old WWE rival Brock Lesnar, who held the IWGP heavyweight title last year. Giant Bernard (formerly known as Albert and A-



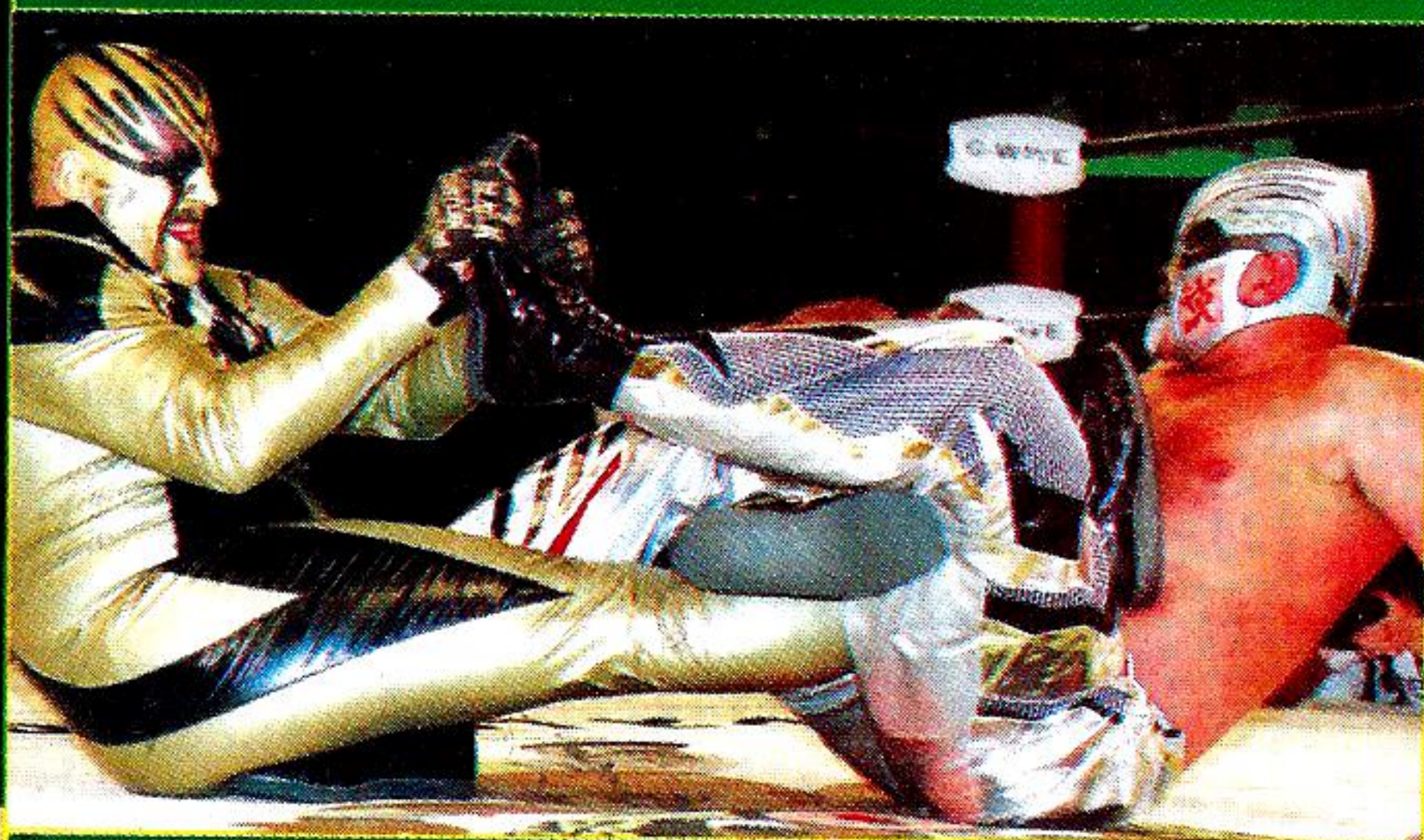
Rikishi nails Johnny Dunn with a sidekick during a recent All Japan show at Tokyo's Sumo Hall. Dunn's partner during the match, Akebono, became famous stateside when he trounced The Big Show at WrestleMania XX.



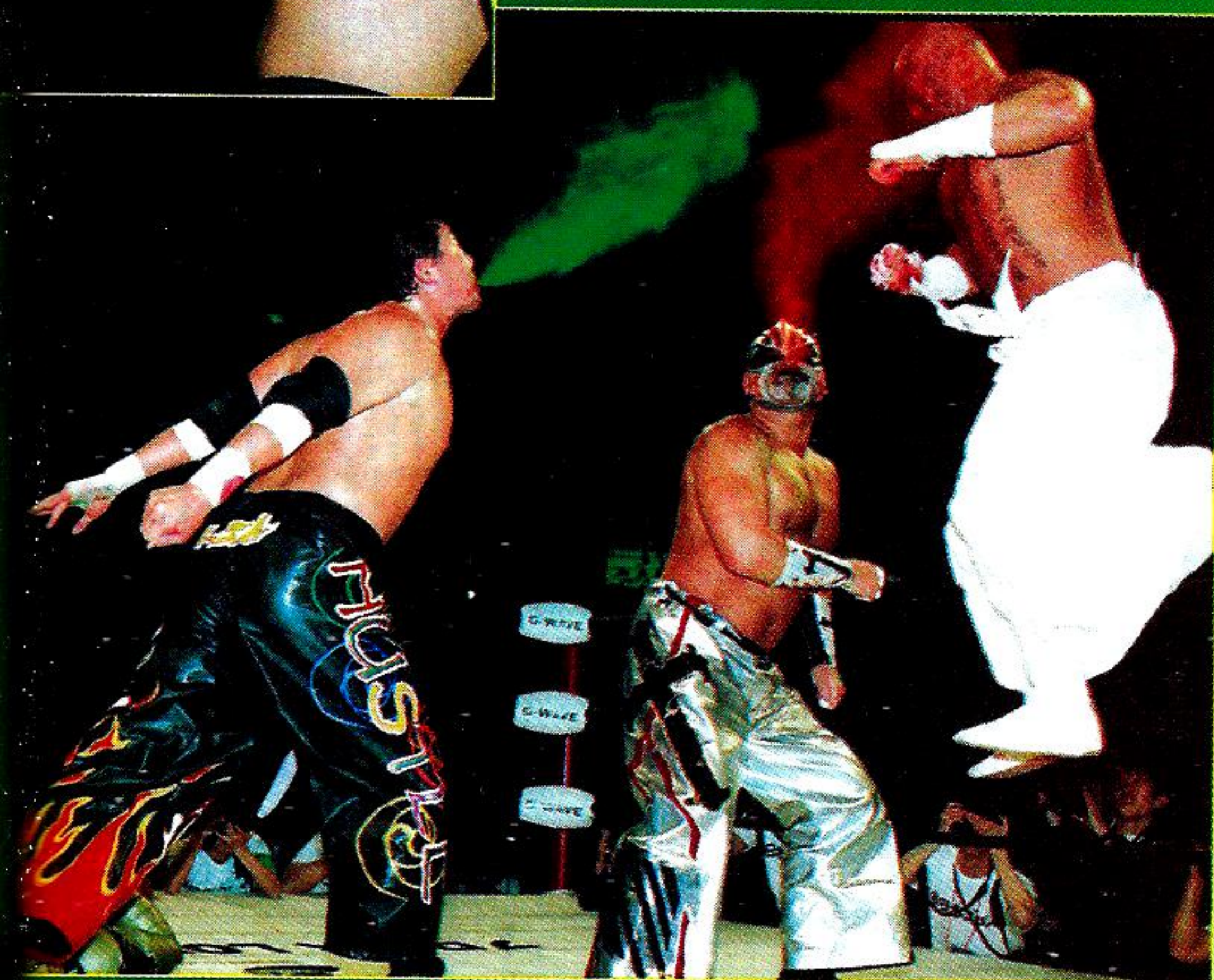
Travis Tomko and Giant Bernard whip Kurt Angle across the ring during this New Japan bout. Angle and his partner, Yuji Nagata, rebounded to win the match.

Train in WWE) and Travis Tomko are the current IWGP International tag team champions. Rikishi, the sensei of the stinkface, has had a career rebirth in Europe and has been successfully promoting major wrestling events throughout Italy, in addition to competing periodically in Japan and throughout Asia.

There was a time during the 1970s and 1980s when the NWA World title was regularly defended in Japan, and the WWF and AWA World titles were defended there from time to time, but those were rare events that involved one elite wrestler. Now, many



Goldust, as Dustin Runnels is known in Japan, struggles to free himself from The Great Muta's figure-four leglock (above). Amid the green and red mist are three faces that should be recognizable to American fans: Tajiri, a longtime WWE star; The Great Muta, who feuded with Sting over the NWA TV title and recently appeared at Destination X; and Hakushi, who challenged Bret Hart for the WWF title in the mid-1990s (below).



When WWE signs a new prospect to a developmental deal, they ship him down to Ohio Valley or Deep South Wrestling and then begin to train him in the so-called "WWE style," which basically strips away everything that might have been unique about that wrestler. What you're left with is a bunch of bland, non-descript guys with the same physique, the same interview style, and the same move set. It's only natural to be curious about what other talent may be out there.

The popularity of American talent overseas is less about getting a look at the unknown as it is a chance to see marquee talent take on local wrestlers. WWE and TNA programming airs throughout the world, and the U.S. is considered to be the birthplace of pro wrestling. Therefore, American wrestlers who have been seen on TV are afforded a great deal of respect internationally. Wrestlers who were stuck at the mid-card level (such as Rikishi, Tomko, and Bernard) are accepted as main-event talents in many countries overseas.

"I wouldn't say there are less politics outside the U.S. than there are in WWE or TNA," Rikishi said when contacted by phone for this story. "It's just that being an American makes you a little more unique, and it opens a few more doors for you. It makes you stand out a bit more. On the other hand, a foreign wrestler trying to make it in America might be

seen as having an obstacle to overcome. Overseas, that 'obstacle' becomes an opportunity."

The dark side to the disintegration of traditional barriers is that international competitors are taking some spots that used to be available for American wrestlers. Look no further than the 2006 "PWI 500" to see how international wrestlers have pushed many Indy stars further out of the limelight.

Don't expect wrestling to get an international makeover overnight. There's zero chance of seeing Hiroshi Tanahashi square off against Hiroyoshi Tenzan in the main event of WrestleMania 24, and ROH could have new singles and tag team champions by the time this issue hits newsstands. But it's impossible to deny that the paradigm shift Friedman laid out is having an effect on wrestling.

And while you won't see Tanahashi meet Tenzan at WrestleMania 24, you just *might* see them square off some day on a "WWE Japan" pay-per-view. □

wrestlers are finding new success in other countries.

There has been a gradual paradigm shift that has occurred since the collapse of WCW and ECW back in 2001. With fewer major touring promotions active, there was a major resurgence in wrestling's independent scene. Ring of Honor was at the forefront of the rise of the Indies and the growth of the Internet-savvy, DVD-trading community. Japanese stars such as Mitsuharu Misawa, Kenta Kobashi, and Toshiaki Kawada captured the attention of a growing number of fans. These fans became more interested in lesser-known (in the U.S. at least) Japanese competitors. ROH promoter Gabe Sapolsky recognized the market value of these Japanese stars and brought competitors such as Morishima, Kobashi, KENTA, Jushin Liger, and others to the U.S. for ROH appearances.

He found that American fans were ready for something different. Part of the blame for that may lie with the WWE developmental system.

the business page

By Frank Ingiosi

If you promote it, they will come ...

Continuing its "Raw Nation" campaign featuring mainstream celebrities (and Steve O of *Jackass* fame), WWE planned a solid weekend of celebrity appearances corresponding with the events leading up to and including WrestleMania 23 in Detroit.

The weekend kicked off with the WWE Hall of Fame induction ceremony as well as what promised to be a star-studded world premiere of the company's third feature film release, *The Condemned*, starring "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin, with many wrestlers and celebrities expected to be in attendance.

As for the event itself, WWE spared no expense in landing some of the top names in pop culture today, all the while paying homage to past WrestleManias by reaching back into the show's storied history for some nostalgia. Aretha Franklin performed "America The Beautiful," as she did 20 years ago at WrestleMania III. Other musical guests included Ludacris and Timbaland, both immensely popular performers at

the top of their respective careers.

Of course, the biggest cross-promotional aspect of WrestleMania 23 was the "Battle Of The Billionaires"

in which ECW champion Bobby Lashley, representing Donald Trump, defeated Intercontinental champion Umaga, representing Vince McMahon. The effects of Trump's involvement were not immediately available at press time, however the early indicators were that his persistent mentioning of the event during interviews with mainstream media outlets around the world helped persuade casual, perhaps morbidly curious, fans into purchasing the pay-per-view.

WrestleMania 23 set the all-time attendance record for Detroit's Ford Field, with 80,103 spectators at the event. It was also the highest-grossing one-day event in WWE history, earning \$5.38-million in ticket sales. Among those in attendance at Ford Field were fans from 24 countries, including all 50 U.S. states and nine Canadian provinces. Early estimates are that WrestleMania generated \$25-million for the local Detroit economy. Of course, this is the second time that WrestleMania has set an attendance record in the Detroit area. Twenty years earlier, WrestleMania III attracted 93,173 fans to the Pontiac Silverdome, setting the all-time attendance record at that facility.

Brand retraction?

WWE Corporate announced via press release in mid-March that it was restructuring its pay-per-view setup to essentially end the brand extension in one respect by making each of its 16 monthly events a company-wide card.



WrestleMania weekend kicked off with the WWE Hall of Fame induction ceremony and the premiere of WWE Films' third venture, *The Condemned*, starring "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin.

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Each year, WWE's four biggest pay shows—WrestleMania, The Royal Rumble, SummerSlam, and The Survivor Series—feature matches from the Raw, Smackdown, and now ECW brands, and, in some cases, there are inter-brand battles. The new arrangement would take WWE back to the days prior to the 2002 brand extension, when pay shows were not brand-exclusive.

WWE Executive Vice President of Marketing Kurt Schneider confirmed the reason behind the decision was to increase buy rates. Schneider stated, "We have seen over the past two years that WWE pay-per-views have significantly better buy rates when more than one WWE brand is involved. WrestleMania, with an average of one million buys per event over the past three years, is the perfect example. This new direction will give our fans more of what they want in every one of our pay-per-views."

Also, WWE will benefit from the ability to promote its pay-per-views on the television shows of all three brands, according to Schneider. The

change was set to take place at Backlash, the event following WrestleMania 23.

Testify! And please pay up front ...

TNA's Team 3D announced they will be opening the Team 3D Academy in Kissimmee, Florida. The Academy—working with the X-Cel Fitness Gym, which will provide the facilities for those enrolled in the year-long training course—promises to focus on the basic aspects of in-ring competition as well as character development and interviewing skills that are necessary for success in today's industry.

The biggest selling point of the program—which had yet to be priced for open enrollment as of press time—is that students are guaranteed ring time with both Brothers Ray and Devon, in addition to other pros who will make special appearances.

While wrestling schools are commonplace in today's industry, Team 3D's reputation for success and longevity in the business should give the tandem a competitive edge in the market, especially for those looking to learn tag team wrestling from two of the best.

WWE Stockwatch

(For the period of February 1 to March 31, 2007)

60-Day High: 16.60 on March 29 and 30

60-Day Low: 15.50 on March 16

52-Week High: 18.54 on June 2, 2006

52-Week Low: 15.35 on August 29, 2006

With the annual shareholders meeting announced for May 11, WWE made a few surprising changes in personnel to ensure competitiveness in the future as well as bring a new perspective to the corporation's overall performance.

In early-March, the company introduced Frank Serpe as its new chief financial officer. Serpe is slated to serve in that position for a year before becoming a senior advisor, with his compensation package including a generous offering of 15,000 shares of restricted stock, with an option to purchase additional stock at the end of the agreement.

Later in March, WWE promoted Michael Sileck to the position of new chief operating officer. Sileck was granted 50,000 restricted shares as part of his compensation package. Current shareholders will probably be satisfied with both compensation deals. Both men come highly touted, and the consolidation of large amounts of stock within the hands of company members should give share prices a bump in the short term.

In other positive news, WWE's DVD sales continue to do extremely well among its target demographic. WWE DVDs have taken up many of the top 10 spots of the *Billboard* rankings under the "Recreational Sports" category. The top-selling WWE DVD for the reporting period was *The New And Improved DeGeneration X*.

Finally, WWE also expanded its media empire—once again—by agreeing to a deal with Cingular Wireless to provide content as well as features such as ringtones for their mobile users. For \$4.99 per month, Cingular users will be able to view full-length matches and other streaming content.



Lucky student grapplers will have the opportunity to tussle with Team 3D's Brother Ray and Brother Devon when the duo opens their training school, Team 3D Academy, in Kissimmee, Florida. In addition to in-ring training, Team 3D will emphasize character development and mike skills.

TV breakdown

RAW (USA)

February 15: 3.0
February 19: 4.0
February 26: 4.3
March 5: 4.0
March 12: 4.1
March 19: 3.7
March 26: 3.9

Analysis: Despite being pre-empted for the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, Raw was expected to score a higher number than the 3.0 it received for its Thursday night airing. Fortunately, Raw rebounded a week later when it earned a 4.0 on February 19 and followed that up a week later with its highest rating of the reporting period, a 4.3, on February 26. That night, Raw truly kicked into gear with its "Road To WrestleMania" promotions and dissention amongst new Raw World tag team champions Shawn Michaels and John Cena beginning to mount. Also, the "Battle Of The Billionaires" began to take shape as Donald Trump made it official: ECW champion Bobby Lashley would be his representative in the feud. In the ensuing two weeks, Raw's numbers dipped a bit despite an appearance by "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin on March 5. There was hope that fallout from WrestleMania 23 would keep Raw above 4.0 throughout April and perhaps beyond.

ECW (Sci Fi)

February 13: 1.5
February 20: 1.3
February 27: 1.6
March 6: 1.7
March 13: 1.6
March 20: 1.6

Analysis: For the first time since the genesis of the new ECW, an "Original" caused such a stir to actually affect the ratings in a positive way. Okay, sure, Steve Austin is not exactly an ECW Original. However his brief stint as a combatant in the first incarnation of the hardcore promotion is still something he speaks of fondly, even though his greatest success occurred in WWE. The "Texas Rattlesnake's" appearance on the March 6 episode of ECW gave the brand its highest rating of the reporting period, a 1.7. In fact, the entire evening was more about Raw than ECW. The same night featured Vince McMahon confronting Bobby Lashley, Donald Trump's chosen competitor for the "Battle Of The Billionaires" match at WrestleMania 23. When it was not promoting WWE's other brands or pay events, ECW did not fare as well, drawing 1.5 and 1.3 ratings in mid-February, a sign that the brand is still having difficulty standing on its own.

SMACKDOWN (CW)

February 16: 3.1
February 23: 3.3
March 2: 2.9
March 9: 2.7
March 16: 2.8
March 23: 3.0

Analysis: Still think Rey Mysterio Jr. is not enough of a draw to be a top guy for one of WWE's brands? Think again. Although Smackdown had held steady, the blue brand received a generous spike when it followed up No Way Out with the continuation of the budding Undertaker-Batista angle along with a surprise appearance—and even more shocking beatdown—of Mysterio at the hands of a visiting Umaga. The resulting 3.3 rating would prove to be the top number for Smackdown over the six-week period. The ratings bottomed out in the 2.7–2.8 range in early-March. The 2.7 occurred on March 9 despite a card that included both a Kane-Batista match and a main event featuring The Undertaker and Finlay. Like all WWE programming, Smackdown should receive the obligatory spike in ratings numbers following WrestleMania 23.

IMPACT (Spike TV)

February 15: 1.2
February 22: 1.0
March 1: 1.1
March 8: 0.9
March 15: 1.0
March 22: 1.0

Analysis: Once again, *Impact* held relatively steady with little movement in the numbers in either direction, although TNA's flagship program did reach a lofty 1.2 on February 15. While fans everywhere were still enjoying their post-Valentine's Day euphoria, TNA was countering that amorous feeling with a gauntlet match (won by Samoa Joe) to determine the top contender to the NWA World title and further development of the Kurt Angle-Scott Steiner feud following "Big Poppa Pump's" interference in Angle's match against NWA champ Christian Cage at Against All Odds. Unfortunately, TNA could not maintain that momentum over the following weeks. While not falling drastically, the program dipped below the 1.0-mark in early-March despite a main event that featured Samoa Joe, Rhino, and Angle taking on Cage, Steiner, and A.J. Styles in a six-man tag match. The next few months will be a big test for TNA as it now has had time to develop its major signings into multiple angles.

win, lose, or draw

By Harry Burkett

ON JUNE 19, TNA will celebrate its fifth anniversary in the business. I emphasize the word "business" because TNA has defied the critics by remaining afloat despite losing millions of dollars during the first few years of its existence. I, for one, officially remove the following question from any further discussion of TNA:

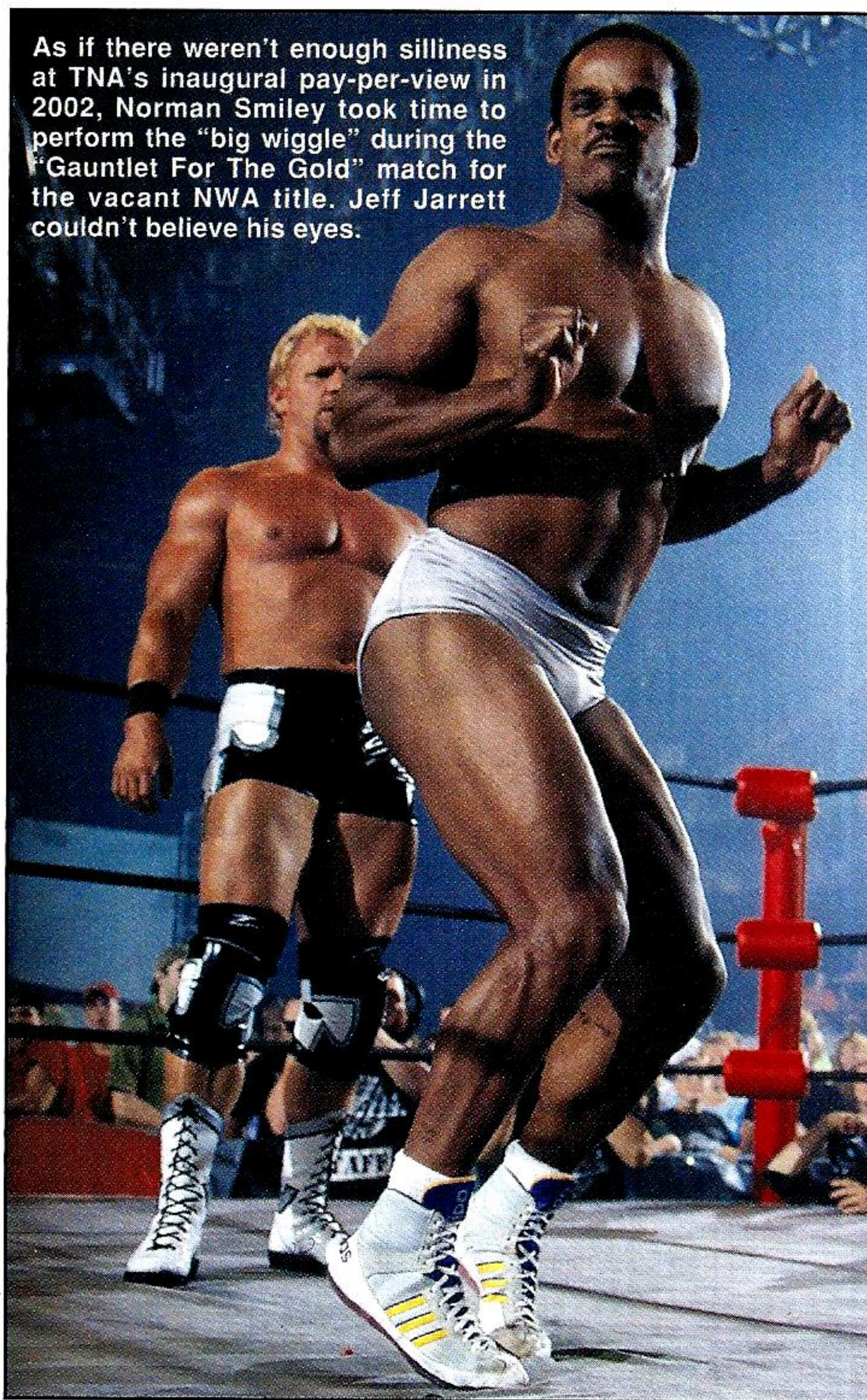
"Will TNA survive another year?"

If you talk to TNA President Dixie Carter or anyone in the locker room, you'll hear that TNA is poised for a great future. The optimist in me is inclined to agree.

For a moment, let's go back in time about five years. What was going on in the wrestling world in June 2002? Steve Austin stormed out of WWE shortly before *Raw* went on the air, leaving a massive void. Shawn Michaels joined the WWE version of the New World Order as a mere sidekick because it was assumed he could never wrestle again. Brock Lesnar won the King of the Ring tournament. Kurt Angle scored a clean submission win over Hulk Hogan. Jesse Ventura announced he wouldn't seek re-election as Minnesota governor. Bret Hart suffered a stroke.

With Austin and The Rock gone, WWE was vulnerable. In desperation, Vince McMahon had rehired Vince Russo to join the creative team, although howls of protest from veterans such as Triple-H and The Undertaker eventually caused McMahon to part ways with him.

As if there weren't enough silliness at TNA's inaugural pay-per-view in 2002, Norman Smiley took time to perform the "big wiggle" during the "Gauntlet For The Gold" match for the vacant NWA title. Jeff Jarrett couldn't believe his eyes.



But there was no other promotion to capitalize on WWE's vulnerability. Since the demise of WCW and ECW in 2001, the X Wrestling Federation, Main Event Championship Wrestling, and World Wrestling All-Stars had been among the upstart promotions that sent out grandiose press releases, only to go out of business within a few months.

Would this new promotion, NWA-TNA, be any different? Jerry and Jeff Jarrett, the founders of the company, were attempting a radical concept: weekly pay-per-views. The Jarretts were betting that fans, starved for an alternative to WWE and its \$29.95 monthly pay-per-views, would be willing to shell out \$9.95 per week to see TNA. The immediate problem was that TNA didn't have a free television

program to promote these events. How could TNA persuade fans to buy the PPVs without exposure?

Vince McMahon noted this problem right away. "It's an unusual approach and a novel idea, but I don't know how you promote when you have no promotional vehicle," McMahon said during an interview on wwe.com. "How do they sell tickets in Huntsville? If they are selling them, fine, but I don't know how they promote if they have no platform. That's difficult to do."

Yet the Jarretts bravely forged ahead with the first Total Nonstop Action weekly pay-per-view, live from the Von Braun Center in Huntsville, Alabama. Then-NWA champion Dan Severn was already booked for a mixed martial arts event the same night, and, quite conveniently for TNA, the NWA Board stripped Severn of the title and allowed it to be put up for grabs in a 20-man "Gauntlet For The Gold" match.

Interestingly, only a handful of the wrestlers

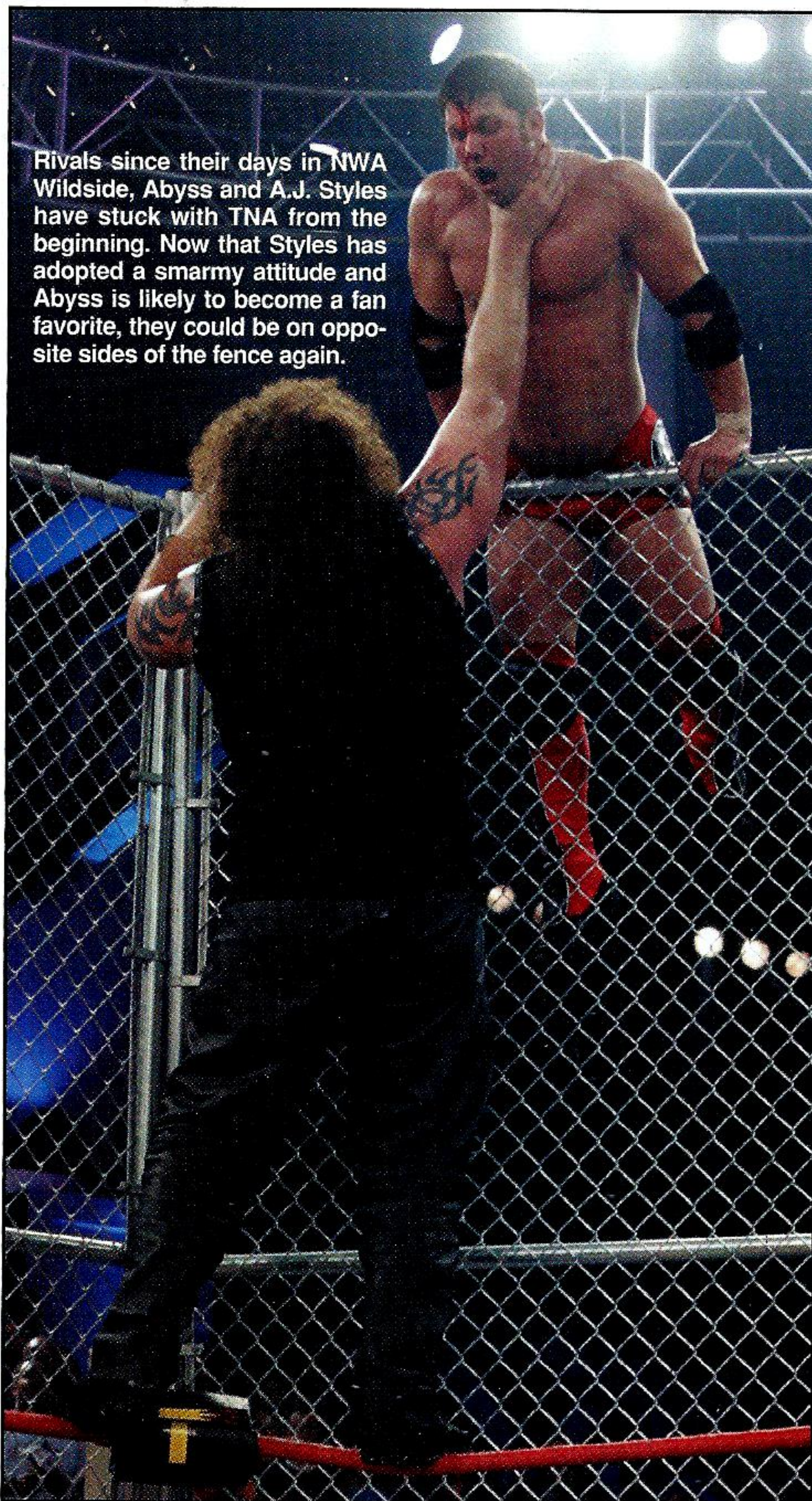
who appeared at TNA's premiere are still with the company. They include Jeff Jarrett (no surprise), Prince Justice (now known as Abyss), K-Krush (now known as Ron Killings), Konnan (now spokesman for LAX), Chris Harris (now a pirate), James Storm (who teamed with Psicosis, not Harris, on the show), and Lash LeRoux (now a cartoonist for the *PWI* family of magazines). Jerry Lynn, A.J. Styles, and Low-Ki (now known as Senshi) teamed together for a six-man match.

One match seemed to come straight out of ECW, as The Dupps beat Joey Matthews (Mercury) and Christian York. This show also has the dubious distinction of featuring the worst gimmick since The Gobbledygooker. Yes, I'm talking about Richard and Rod Johnson, grown men wearing ring attire that looked like condoms. These big guys, whom you may also know as The Shane Twins and The Gymini, -looked ridiculous. And, believe it or not, TNA also booked

a midget match! Appropriately, this took only a short amount of time, as Teo pinned Hollywood in less than three minutes.

The main event was the "Gauntlet For The Gold" match. Patterned after the Royal Rumble, combatants entered the four-sided ring in 90-second intervals. Jeff Jarrett was impressive at the outset, eliminating Buff Bagwell, Lash LeRoux, and Norman Smiley in less than five minutes. Malice (the late Jeremy Tuite) was even more impressive, throwing Bruce (Alan Funk), K-Krush, Del Rios, Konnan,

Rivals since their days in NWA Wildside, Abyss and A.J. Styles have stuck with TNA from the beginning. Now that Styles has adopted a smarmy attitude and Abyss is likely to become a fan favorite, they could be on opposite sides of the fence again.



and Rick Steiner over the top rope.

As odd as this sounds, Scott Hall and country music star Toby Keith were the next two entrants. How the NWA Board approved Toby Keith as a contender for the NWA title is beyond me. Anyway, Keith hoisted Jarrett over with a sharp-looking suplex before he and Hall dumped the second-generation star to the arena floor.

Ken Shamrock, Scott Hall, Malice, and Gran Apolo comprised the final four. Malice threw Hall and Apolo over the top rope, setting up a regulation match between him and

Shamrock. Former NWA World champion Rick Steamboat served as the special referee, as Shamrock worked to overcome Malice's size advantage. Finally, Shamrock—sporting a pair of fancy sideburns—executed a belly-to-belly suplex to pin Malice after seven minutes of action. Shamrock was declared the new NWA champion.

After this mental trip through time, I'm struck by how TNA—which was once saddled with a Southern regional label—has transformed into a cool alternative to WWE. Any promotion that considered the Armstrongs the first family of wrestling and hailed Gypsy Joe as one of the sport's greatest legends was not going to appeal to casual fans. And TNA's first pay-per-view, with Toby Keith, along with NASCAR drivers Hermie Sadler and Sterling Marlin, appealed primarily to a Southern audience.

The most important change TNA made was getting out of Huntsville and the Fairgrounds Coliseum in Nashville. I love Southern culture, South-

ern cooking, and Southern hospitality, but TNA wasn't going to succeed until it appealed to fans everywhere. Orlando, Florida, is culture-neutral, appealing to the North and South and fans worldwide.

And, by the way, was I the only one to forget that Ken Shamrock was the NWA champion? Considering how much TNA would like to appeal to UFC fans these days, the promotion was about five years ahead of its time.

Congratulations, TNA. Now, what are the chances of TNA surviving another five years? □

the straight shooter

By Dan Murphy

FOR MY MONEY, the most intriguing match of WrestleMania 23 was the eight-man "Money In The Bank" ladder match. As a rule, I'm not much of a fan of multiple-man matches, or ladder matches for that matter. Give me a good, old-fashioned singles or tag team match, sufficient time to let the match develop, and I'm one happy wrestling fan. These multiple-man affairs tend to look more like a demolition derby than head-to-head athletic contests.

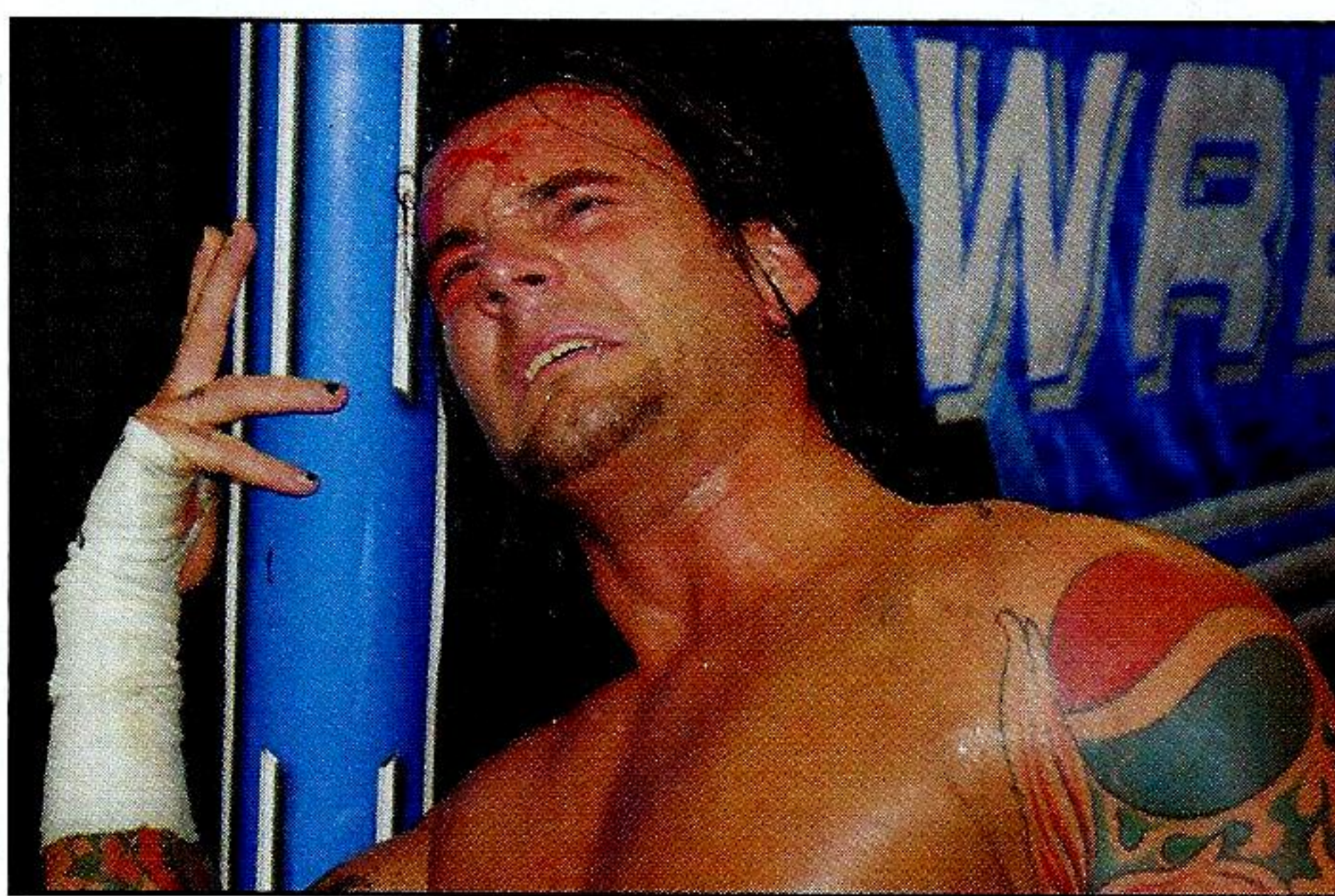
Imagine throwing Wladimir Klitschko, Evander Holyfield, Shannon Briggs, Hasim Rahman, and Oleg Maskaev all in the ring at the same time. Let them bludgeon each other with hooks, crosses, uppercuts, and—just for giggles—steel chairs. Does that mean the last man left standing is the best boxer? Or is he just the one with enough common sense to keep his head out of the way of fast-moving foreign objects? And, if so, is that any criteria for doling out a coveted world title match?

No, it's not. It's a lousy system developed by lazy matchmakers. But the past two money-in-the-bank winners (Edge and Rob Van Dam) managed to successfully convert those wins into world title reigns, so if the past is any indicator, the winner of the "Money In The Bank" match deserves some respect.

This year's field was upped from six competitors to eight. Of those

eight, four seemed to have a solid chance of winning. Edge and Randy Orton are both former Raw World champions who are each due for another run on the main-event level. Ken Kennedy is cocky yet charismatic and has been a key factor in Smackdown's recent resurgence. And C.M. Punk is the indy darling turned would-be savior of the ECW brand, the straightedge superman who is the trendiest guy to cheer since Peyton Manning.

What of the other four competitors in the "MITB" match: The Hardys, King Booker, and my personal favorite, Finlay? All filler, sorry to say. Two experienced veterans and two kids dumb enough to fall from great heights to make things interesting. I didn't know who would ascend that ladder and grab that shiny black briefcase, but I was sure it would be one of the first four. I settled in to see which of those four would make a world title run some-



C.M. Punk showed the first drops of blood during WrestleMania's "Money In The Bank" ladder match, but it didn't stop him from competing until the very end with Ken Kennedy. Unfortunately for Punk, Kennedy eliminated Punk with a ladder to the face for the win and the title shot.

time this year, and I took detailed notes as the bout unfolded.

0:44—Finlay gets his long-coveted WrestleMania moment out of the way with an impressive suicide dive off the top rope to the floor. Who says Irishmen can't jump?

2:26—We have blood! C.M. Punk gets busted open courtesy of Edge, who throws Hornswoggle's stepladder into his face. Edge has more focus than anyone else in this match. You've got to be impressed by his hunger.

3:07—King Booker asserts himself, dropping everyone and taking a moment to celebrate with a quick spinneroni. Booker looks good, but seems reluctant to climb the ladder, which Matt and Jeff capitalize upon.

4:57—Scary moment when Mr. Kennedy executes a Ken-ton bomb on a ladder and lands awkwardly on his neck. The thing with these "MITB" matches is that everyone seems more concerned with hitting memorable high-risk moves than winning the match. My advice: Forget about the highspots. Shelton Benjamin scored four of five huge ones last year, and he's not even on the 'Mania card this year. Concentrate on grabbing that briefcase.

5:46—Matt and Jeff Hardy once again show why they are wrestling's dopest duo. With everyone else dazed, they scamper up opposite sides of the ladder and duke it out, preventing each other from grabbing the briefcase until Finlay pushes over the ladder. Real smart, guys. Wouldn't it have made sense for one of you to grab the case while the other protected him? Then you could have made a gentleman's agreement for the winner to face his brother in a singles match with the title shot at stake, just to be fair. Instead, you wasted the closest either of you will likely ever get to a world title shot. Smart.

6:48—Punk pulls the Terry Funk whirlybird with the ladder. Unfortunately,



Both of the Hardys had solid chances of winning the coveted suitcase, but the pair opted for high spots and crowd-delighting feats of insanity, like this leap onto Edge that snapped the ladder in two and resulted in Edge being carried out on a stretcher. Kennedy should be grateful to Jeff Hardy for this elimination.

Edge has seen enough Funk matches to know enough to duck and then flattens Punk with a spear.

8:25—Orton foils Edge by pushing him off the ladder. The disintegration of Rated RKO continues.

9:31—Jeff Hardy does what we all knew he would do: a crazy jump off the ladder that ruins his chances of winning the match ... just like every other ladder match he's ever been in. This time, he breaks both Edge and a ladder in half with a legdrop off a 14-foot ladder. "Win the damn match. What the hell's wrong with you, kid?" JBL wonders aloud. So do I. Edge is carried out.

12:23—Orton destroys Punk with an RKO off the ladder, followed by Booker nailing Orton with a Book-end off the ladder. Neither Punk nor Orton is a factor in the match again.

14:09—Matt shows some killer instinct, threatening to lay out Sharmell with a twist of fate unless Booker comes off the ladder. Booker hesitates only a moment before doing the chivalrous thing and costing himself the match. I'm impressed. I didn't think Matt had

that sort of sadism in him.

15:10—"Maybe the last man with a pulse is going to win this thing," says Jim Ross after Finlay almost breaks his own back with a Celtic cross on a ladder.

16:00—The guilty pleasure of the night: Hornswoggle goes to climb the ladder only to get into a slugfest with Mr. Kennedy (who really hasn't been much of a factor to this point).

16:57—Kennedy flattens Hornswoggle with a Ken-ton bomb off the ladder. Somewhere, King Kong Bundy smiles to himself.

18:25—It comes down to Punk and Kennedy, firing away on top of the ladder. The ECW hero vs. the Smackdown heir apparent.

19:08—Kennedy grabs the case to win the match after smashing Punk in the face with a ladder.

Kennedy will have his work cut out for him in following in the footsteps of RVD and Edge, especially with Undertaker wearing the Smackdown World title belt. But an extreme makeover in ECW might be just what "Mr. Money In The Bank" and the ECW brand need right now. ☐

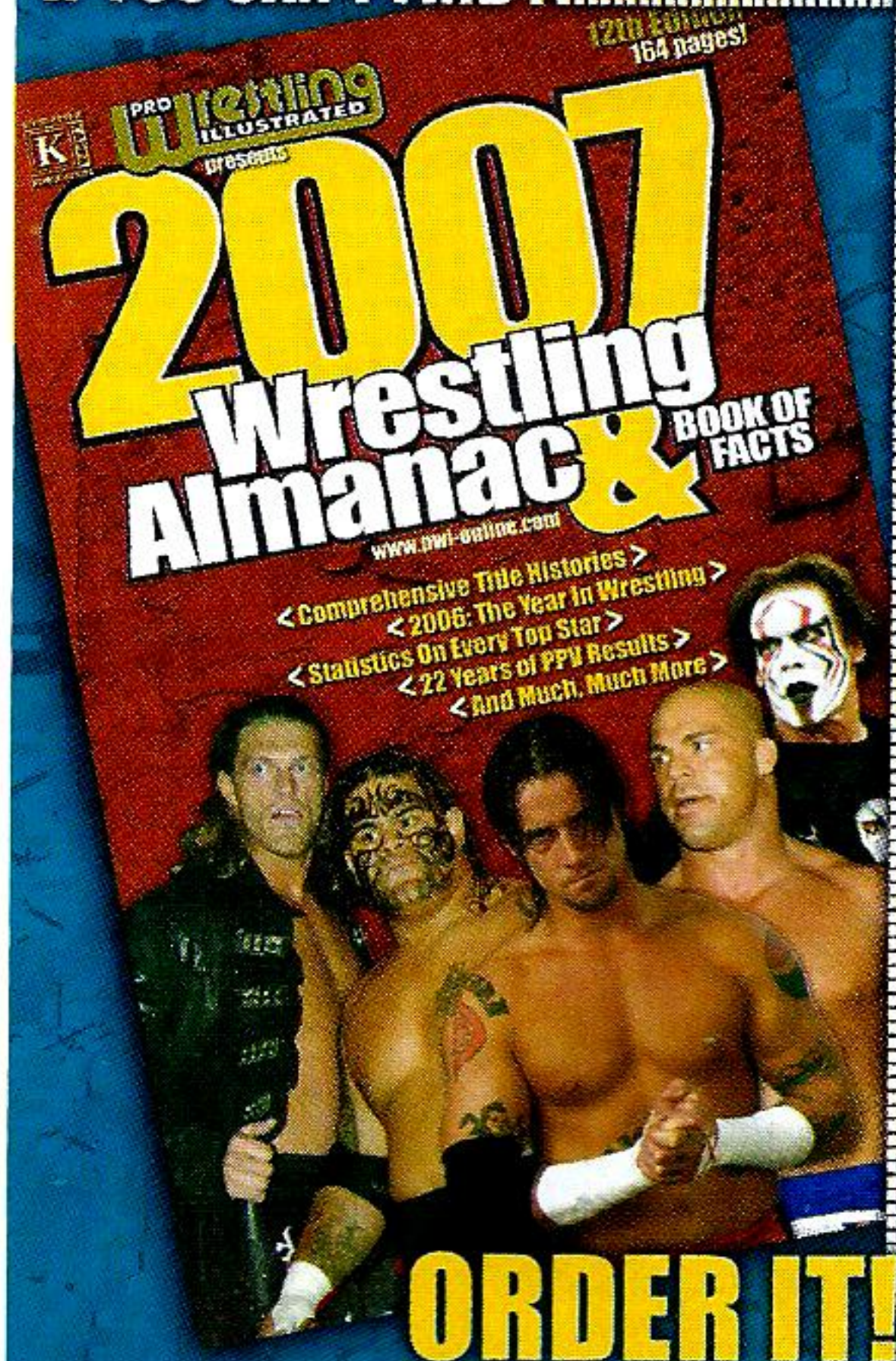
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the trade's mark

By Frank Ingiosi

IT WAS BOUND to happen at some point, right? I mean, with the attention of those who follow professional sports—as well as politicians—affixed firmly on the use of performance-enhancing substances, it was only a matter of time before the discerning glare of public scrutiny shifted toward wrestling.

Once again, for better or worse, the sport is being dragged through the mud, this time due to a report linking—as of press time—11 prominent professional wrestlers to a scandal involving an online supplier of performance-enhancing substances, including anabolic steroids and human growth hormone (HGH).

When the story first broke, it

focused primarily on athletes in “mainstream” sports, most notably professional baseball, which, thanks to a number of steroid-related scandals over the past few years, has faced the tremendously daunting task of cleansing its murky reputation. Attention then darted from baseball to all sports, including professional wrestling, thus leading to the revelation that there might have been some grapplers connected to this scandal.

Shocked? I wish I could say I was. It seems as if it's about that time to re-examine substance use in professional wrestling ... again.

First, allow me to make it perfectly clear that I'm not here to indict those who may or may not be involved in this scandal, or even to dignify the veracity of the report by repeating in this column the names leaked to the media in connection with the investigation. Thanks to law school brainwashing, I'm a stickler for the “let's wait until all the evidence is presented” way of thinking.

Rather, I'd like to take these thousand-ish words to pose the million-dollar question (or questions) that are now being asked of every sport in which performance-enhancing substance use is allegedly prevalent. Essentially, if everyone's doing it, is it cheating? Or, more specifically, should we—as fans—even care?

In order to fully gain an appreciation for the loaded nature of those questions, I think it's necessary to briefly examine just a few of the reasons why a professional wrestler may utilize a performance-enhancing substance when so much scientific

information exists indicating just how damaging it could be in the long run.

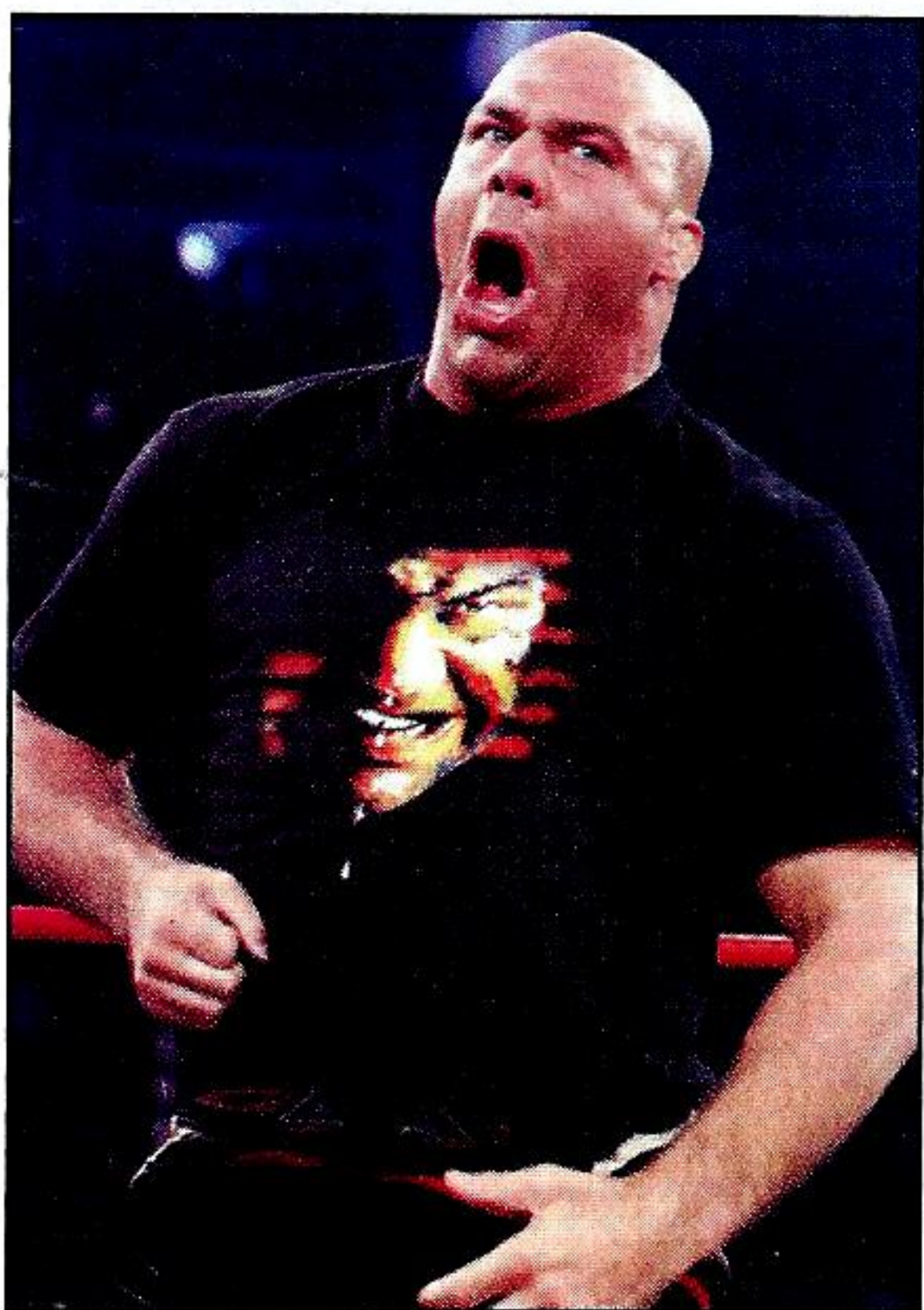
Of course, there's the obvious benefit of increasing muscle mass and gaining a physical appearance so impressive that fans and promoters stand up and take notice. In an industry where a premium is placed on imposing physical appearances, it's only natural that some would resort to outside assistance to maintain the appearance of the perfect physical specimen.

Along those same lines, there are some who achieve lofty heights in fame and finances, and quickly become deathly afraid to lose it. In an industry as cutthroat as wrestling, those who compete at the highest level know that—if they are injured for any significant amount of time—there will be a line of big, lumbering goons waiting to take their place as the promotion's top guy. They may not want to engage in something they view as wrong, but in their eyes, it's the only choice if they intend to have some longevity in this business.

Still, there are others who have gone through devastating injuries and have been prescribed substances to aid with recovery. Those cases are the most difficult to condemn. If the only way to get back to your livelihood—as well as cope with the tremendous pain it brings—is to bend the rules a bit, who's to say they're wrong?

Finally, there are some who just don't know any other way to get by. These substances have gotten them to where they are now, and, law or health be damned, they will continue on the cycle of self-destruction until they can't do it anymore.

Whatever the rationale, the fact remains that anyone who purchases and uses almost any substance that requires a prescription from a medical professional—but does so without said prescription or authorization—is still doing something illegal, regardless of what rules are in place in the organization where one works. Your company may not have a rule that specifically prohibits slapping every fourth woman that walks



TNA's greatest acquisition of 2006, Kurt Angle, was named in connection with recent scandals regarding the sale of steroids and human growth hormone on the Internet. Angle insists he used HGH only to recover from his multiple neck injuries.



Randy Orton and Edge, along with Rey Mysterio Jr. and Gregory Helms, were among those implicated in purchasing steroids and/or HGH on the Internet. Edge says he took steroids immediately after spinal surgery a few years ago, but hasn't used them recently. Neither member of Rated RKO wants any part of this controversy.

through the door, but guess what: It's still against the law.

Yet, in the case of professional wrestling, should fans exhibit the same moral outrage as is directed toward Barry Bonds or Mark McGwire? Neither man has been definitively labeled beyond all reasonable doubt as someone who has used performance-enhancing substances to gain an advantage, although fingers have been pointed. Until proven otherwise, they're merely suspects rather than violators.

In this case, the argument could be made that professional wrestling is much different from any of the mainstream sports currently in the crosshairs of steroid investigations. More than ever, wrestling is truly living up to its billing as sports *entertainment*. Those who step through the ropes are athletes ... okay, nearly everyone ... but they're also there to put on a show for the fans. In that respect, should we care how the athletes get to where they are today? Should it bother us that maybe, just *maybe*, some of these men might have bent the rules a bit to secure their future while entertaining us at the same time? That's not for me to answer. Hell, that may not be for any of us to answer.

There definitely is a gray area

when it comes to professional wrestling and performance-enhancing substances. One must suspend much of reality to truly appreciate the entertainment value of the sport as it exists today. For the health and well-being of those involved, I'm inclined to take a hard stand against performance-enhancing

substances and the damage they can do to wrestlers, and—in the all-too-common instances in which said substances contribute to an early demise—their families and friends. As a fan, and someone supportive of a person's right to pursue their chosen course of employment, I can't in good faith pretend to understand the physical stress or mental pressure that comes with engaging in such a vicious sport, and, thus, who am I to pass judgment?

So, here we are, back where we started—wondering whether there should even be a public discourse on steroid use in professional wrestling. Still, I'm interested to hear what my fellow fans' thoughts are on this controversial topic, so shoot me an e-mail at pwi_ingiosi@yahoo.com sharing your thoughts on whether the issue of performance-enhancing substance use is, or should even be, something discussed when it comes to professional wrestling. Check out "The Turn" at www.pwi-online.com to see what the general consensus is—if any—amongst your peers.

Let the debate begin. □

(Questions, comments, concerns you'd like Frank to address? Send it all to pwi_ingiosi@yahoo.com. Also, visit www.pwi-online.com for Frank's column, "The Turn," posted each Friday afternoon.)

DON'T MISS

PWI UPDATE WITH FRANK INGIOSI

EXCLUSIVELY ON:
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Pro Wrestling Illustrated Managing Editor Frank Ingiosi, is insightful, provocative, and downright funny! You've read "The Trade's Mark" in *PWI*. Now check out Frank's column, "The Turn," every Friday afternoon.

Ingiosi On Undertaker vs. Henry: "The Undertaker looked great, hitting spot after spot and manhandling Henry as if he were a sack of potatoes (which, ironically, will rank three spots higher than Henry in this year's *PWI* 500.)"

Ingiosi On Joey Styles' Promo: "Nothing was sacred, as Styles attacked some of the company's ridiculous storylines, as well as the chairman himself. Basically, for one beautiful three-minute span, Styles was the voice of every disgruntled fan."

Ingiosi On WWE Women: "I hope something relatively interesting happens soon, because I'm actually getting tired of this weekly, mind-numbingly repetitive catfight between Mickie James, Ashley, and Trish. It's actually gotten to the point where it bores me both as a wrestling fan and as a man. Did I just write that?"

Frank Ingiosi ...
[on pwi-online.com!](http://pwi-online.com)

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You're at the airport. You see your favorite wrestler relaxing in one of the terminals. You rush up to him or her as questions fill your excited mind.

There are certain things you just *have* to know about this person.

Well, these are the 12 questions you'd never think of asking

12 questions

JOHNNY "HAVOC" DEVINE

1

What's the biggest benefit in joining one of Raven's "flocks"? Is there a 401(k) plan?

It has to be the spiffy new gear I wear. Nothing says killer fanboy like a long trench coat and leather kilt. 401(k)? Ha! Good burial plot, maybe!

2

The former Michael Shane seems to change his name every few months. How often do you guys get confused about what you should be calling that guy?

It's funny you mention it, but Kaz and I have taken to just calling him Mr. Happy. He is such a positive and upbeat guy now. Eventually, Kaz will just be known as K and I will be H and Martyr will be M to simplify things.

3

As a former member of Paparazzi Productions, what was your favorite celebrity paparazzi moment of the past year?

I am more of a movie buff than a paparazzi watcher. Movie-wise? I'll go with either *Pan's Labyrinth* or *Borat*.

4

How often does Frankie Kazarian get stopped at airports and asked if he is Antonio Banderas?

Antonio Banderas? I don't see it. I think of him more as a rugged Gene Hackman or maybe Zorro.

5

You know, low serotonin levels have been associated with such disorders as clinical depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, migraines, and irritable bowel syndrome. Exactly how many of those ailments does Raven suffer from?

None to my knowledge. He's more of a sufferer from Asperger syndrome or possibly schizotypal personality disorder. But those are only guesses.

6

What were the greatest words of wisdom Scott D'Amore ever said to you?

He told me "Johnny, a man's only got two things in this world. His word and his 'grapefruits.' Don't break them for anyone. Now, can I borrow a hundred bucks? I give you my word I'll pay you back next week." I am still waiting for my cash.

7

Bad News Allen was one of the men who trained you at the Hart family "Dungeon." What is your lasting memory of Bad News?

Presence. When Bad News entered the room, everyone stopped to acknowledge his presence. He always dressed immaculately and with a look of supreme confidence.

8

If you could borrow Raven's Singapore cane and just whack the heck out of any one person, who would it be and why?

It would be the news director at CNN for giving so much press to Anna Nicole Smith's death. Sweet Jeebus!

9

What's the best place to grab a late-night meal in Orlando?

I am partial to the Ale House's late-night vodka. And they have food.

10

Who was the last wrestler you asked for an autograph?

Wow, I think it was Stu Hart. I haven't asked anyone in a long time.

11

As a Canadian, you've got to have an opinion on this: Who is going to win the Stanley Cup this season?

Well, I still hold out hope that the Calgary Flames will pull through and make the playoffs and get there. But, in my mind, the smart money is on Detroit.

12

What is your favorite "Havoc": Havok of the X-Men; Havoc, the 2003 motion picture starring Anne Hathaway; Havoc from Mobb Deep, or the G.I. Joe H.A.V.O.C. utility vehicle?

Oh, good question. Being a comic geek, I love anything related to X-Men, but I will have to go with the H.A.V.O.C. from G.I. Joe. It was just so damn cool. Like me. I would have been a badass like G.I. Joe. My code name would have been Angry Midget. And my specialty would have been beating up old guys.

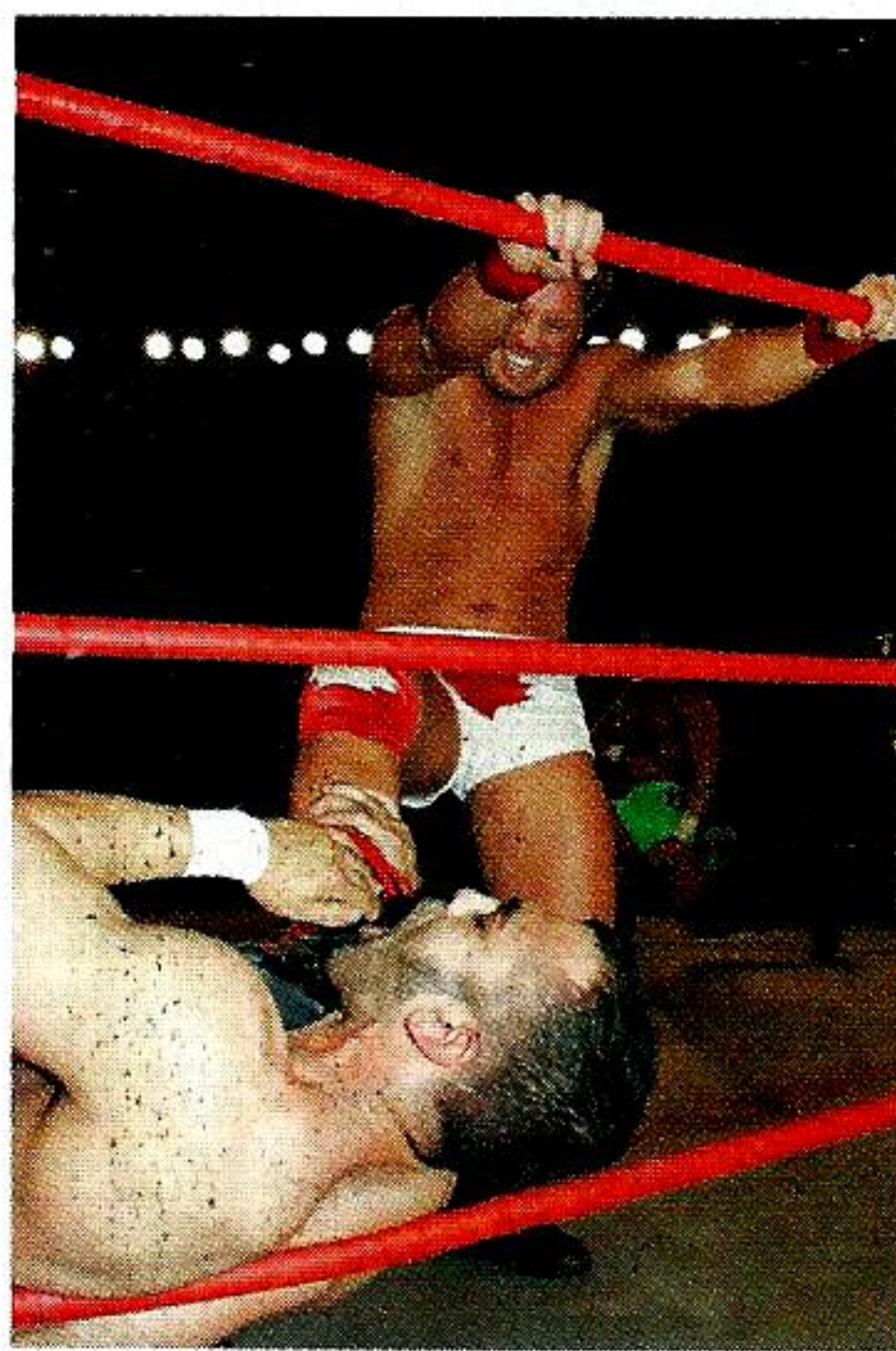




Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



VINCE McMAHON

The Wrestling Observer **Hall of Fame**

In each issue, *PWI* will honor one member of the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame, which we recognize as the sport's official Hall of Fame

NO ONE PERSON has ever had as profound an impact on the world of pro wrestling as Vincent Kennedy McMahon.

A third-generation promoter, McMahon revolutionized wrestling by tearing apart the territorial system that ruled wrestling for decades and taking the World Wrestling Federation from a regional promotion to an international phenomenon.

McMahon coined the term "sports entertainment," introduced wrestling to pay-per-view, and created

WrestleMania, the industry's signature supercard.

McMahon has successfully transitioned from a behind-the-scenes promoter and straight-laced announcer to arguably wrestling's top villain of the past decade. McMahon relishes his status as the most powerful—and controversial—figure in wrestling and the man who turned a family business into a billion-dollar industry.

He was born on August 24, 1945, in Pinehurst, North Carolina, and raised by his mother. At the age of 12, he was finally introduced to his biological father, Vincent James McMahon, a prominent wrestling promoter in the Northeast. The elder

McMahon sent his son to Fishborne Military School, and, in 1968, "Vince Jr."—as he became known—graduated from East Carolina University with a degree in marketing.

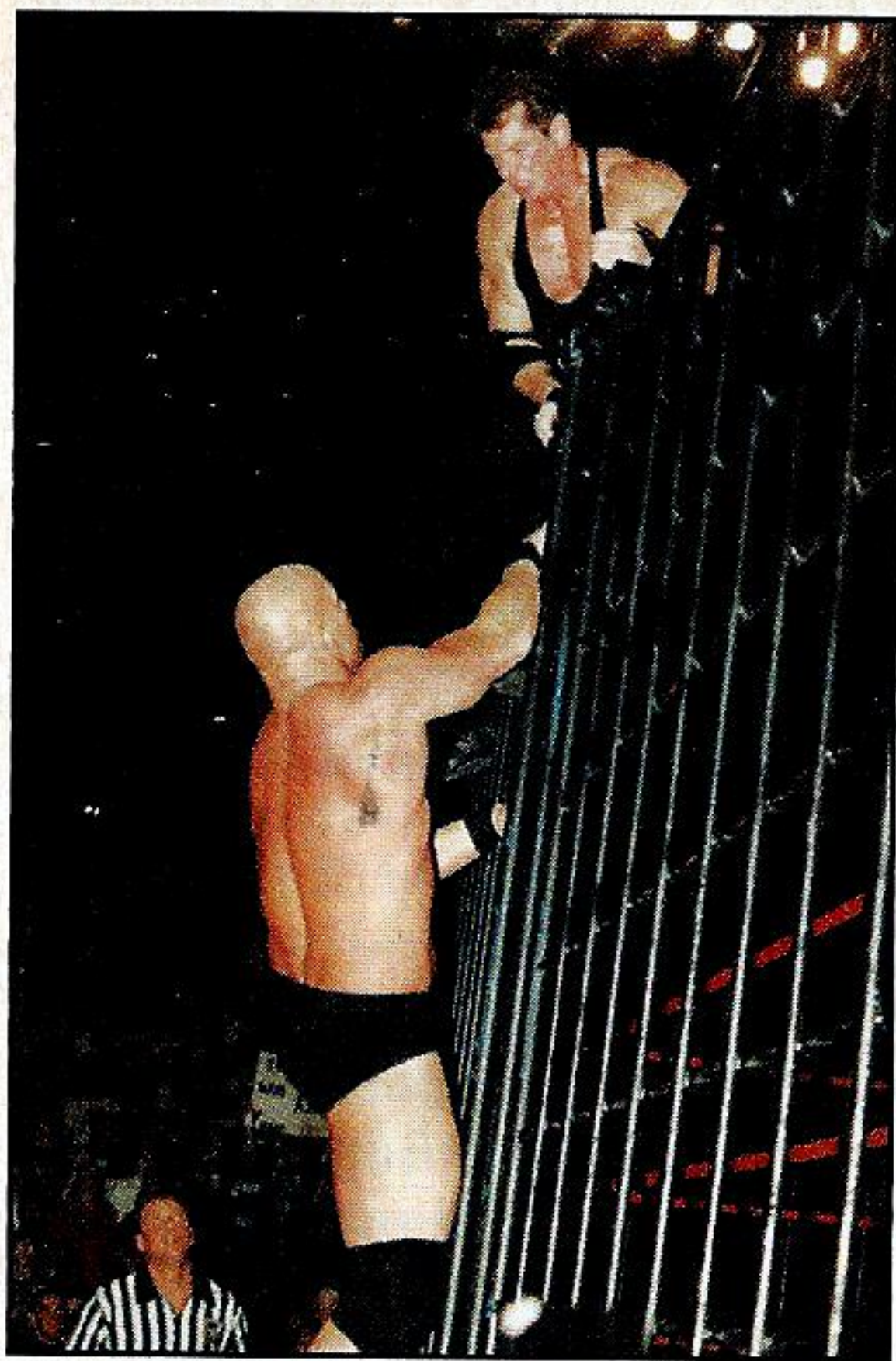
But Vince Jr. couldn't resist the lure of the family business. In 1971, he promoted his first wrestling card, a World Wide Wrestling Federation card in Bangor, Maine. The younger McMahon yearned to become a wrestler, but his father squashed those ambitions. However, he hired Vince as a play-by-play announcer and interviewer in 1972.

With the elder McMahon suffering from cancer, Vince Jr. bought his father's company (Capitol Sports, the parent company of the WWF) in 1982. McMahon's vision of what pro wrestling could become was drastically different than his father's. After his father's death, McMahon aggressively expanded his World Wrestling Federation beyond its stronghold of New York and the Northeast. He refined the production values of the WWF product and secured new television outlets throughout the country. Rather than adhere to pro wrestling's unwritten rule of acknowledging the territorial boundaries of rival promoters, McMahon endeavored to establish the WWF brand name nationally.

McMahon's expansion plans hit a speed bump in 1984 after WWF programming began airing in the time slot that formerly belonged to Georgia's *World Championship Wrestling* program on Ted Turner's



McMahon interviews the "High Chief" Peter Maivia, the grandfather of The Rock, early in his broadcast career. Because the elder McMahon refused to let Vince become a wrestler, he embraced his on-air role as a broadcaster.



The climax of McMahon's feud with Steve Austin occurred inside a steel cage at the St. Valentine's Day Massacre in 1999. McMahon might have lost the match, but the rivalry between Vinnie Mac and "Stone-Cold" helped turn the WWF into a billion-dollar empire.

Superstation WTBS. That acquisition backfired on McMahon as fans rejected his brand of "sports entertainment." McMahon sold the WTBS time slot to National Wrestling Alliance promoter Jim Crockett Jr., sowing the first seeds of a promotional rivalry that would span the next 17 years.

To give his WWF national appeal, McMahon seized upon the most charismatic and marketable star he could find: Hulk Hogan. Following Hogan's star-making role as "Thunderlips" in *Rocky III*, McMahon succeeded in making Hogan a mainstream star and used the term "Hulkamania" to brand the WWF champion's amazing popularity.

In 1985, McMahon booked a star-studded wrestling extravaganza dubbed "WrestleMania," which took place at Madison Square Garden. In the main event, Hogan teamed with fellow *Rocky III* star Mr. T to take on Roddy Piper and Paul Orndorff. In another bout, chart-topping pop music star Cyndi Lauper accompanied Wendi Richter in her bid to unseat reigning WWF women's champion The Fabulous Moolah. The event featured such celebrities as Muhammad Ali, New York

Yankees manager Billy Martin, Liberace, and the Rockettes, setting a new standard for glitz and glamour in pro wrestling.

McMahon experienced several setbacks in the late-1980s and early-'90s, including a failed attempt to break Joe Weider's stranglehold on professional bodybuilding with his World Bodybuilding Federation. In 1991, following the defection of Hogan from the company, McMahon faced two devastating scandals: sexual harassment charges involving several WWF employees and a federal investigation into charges of conspiracy to distribute steroids.

He managed to beat the federal charges and breathed new life into the WWF by promoting smaller, more athletic wrestlers such as Bret Hart and Shawn Michaels. In the mid-1990s, McMahon's WWF was challenged by Ted Turner's World Championship Wrestling, spawning a head-to-head promotional war that resulted in the greatest boom period in wrestling history.

In a moment that would be a turning point in his career, McMahon arranged for an early stoppage in a match between Hart and Michaels at Survivor Series 1997, ensuring that Michaels would win the WWF championship. Hart, who had already agreed to terms with WCW,

accused McMahon of "screwing" him out of the title. McMahon responded to Hart's allegations by taking the controversy public and creating the character of Mr. McMahon, a power-hungry, unscrupulous, evil owner based very closely on McMahon's real reputation.

McMahon proved to be the perfect foil for Steve Austin—the company's most popular star—and became one of the most successful on-screen villains in wrestling history, even winning the WWF World title.

Over the past decade, McMahon has often returned to the spotlight to feud with WWE's top stars, including The Rock, Ric Flair, Shawn Michaels, and John Cena. Most recently, the WWE chairman made headlines when he made a hair-vs.-hair bet with Donald Trump, pitting McMahon's representative, Intercontinental champion Umaga, against Trump's representative, ECW champion Bobby Lashley, at WrestleMania 23. As it turned out, Lashley won the match and Trump and Lashley shaved McMahon bald.

For the past 25 years, McMahon has been wrestling's one constant. He is the most powerful figure in the industry, equally respected and reviled throughout the business. Often criticized, McMahon has shown his dedication and determination to drive his company to new heights time and time again. He won the "Monday Night War," took WWE public, and became a billionaire in the process. He is a charter member of the *Wrestling Observer* Hall of Fame. □



During a media event with USA Network President Bonnie Hammer, McMahon poses with The Big Show, Steve Austin, John Cena, Torrie Wilson, Carlito, and his wife, Linda. McMahon can be proud of what he has accomplished during his 35-year career.

Photo courtesy of USA Network

independent roundup

By Al Alven

OVER THE PAST few years, Ring of Honor has established an impressive global presence and reputation despite its status as an "independent." The company now schedules regular tours of England, has had its champions defend their titles in various countries, and has forged successful working relationships with organizations such as Dragon Gate in Japan.

Still, few within ROH seemed prepared for the unexpected events of early spring that saw the five-year-old company's singles and tag team championships fall into the hands of foreign challengers from different home promotions.

On February 17, NOAH star **Takeshi Morishima** stunned just about everyone in attendance at the Pennsylvania National Guard Armory in Philadelphia by pinning **Homicide** to capture the ROH heavyweight title. In doing so, the 28-year-old Morishima became

the first international competitor (and ninth man, overall) to hold the coveted championship.

Two weeks later, Dragon Gate mainstays **Naruke Doi** and **Shingo** defeated **Jay** and **Mark Briscoe** for the ROH tag straps in Liverpool, England. While Swiss star **Claudio Castagnoli** had previously held one-half of the tag team title, this marked the first time that the belts were won by a pair of wrestlers not born in North America.

The Briscoe brothers went on to reclaim the titles on March 30 in Detroit in an amazing contest that saw Jay single-handedly triumph over Doi and Shingo after Mark injured himself while attempting a shooting star press.

Morishima, however, already looks to be gaining a stranglehold on the company's top prize. At 6'3", 297-pounds, the nine-year pro is also, by far, the largest champion in ROH history. After debuting with a loss to **Samoa Joe** (who has since left the company), Morishima won the title from Homicide, crushed **B.J. Whitmer** in his first defense, and then turned back **KENTA** at Nippon Budokan in Tokyo. At this stage, it looks as if Englishman **Nigel McGuinness** is best positioned to take a run at the gold.

On March 3 in Vancouver, British Columbia, former ROH champ **Bryan Danielson** made his return to the ring at an NWA-ECCW show. He initially served as a guest referee for a gauntlet match, but interjected himself into the fray after **Aaron Stevens** had defeated **Gurv Sirah**, **Sid Sylum**, **Kyle O'Riley**, and **Nelson Creed**. After tearing off his striped shirt, Danielson jumped Stevens and forced him to tap out to a cross-face chicken wing.

Since then, Danielson has used the Internet to repeatedly announce his intention to become the next NWA champion. Does Danielson plan to sign with TNA? No, not necessarily. There are rumblings throughout the various NWA affiliates that the alliance's Board of Directors has failed to come to terms with TNA regarding the use of the NWA name. Without a deal, it is likely that the NWA will discontinue its recognition of Christian Cage as its champion.

Danielson's declaration has prompted rebuttals from a number of indy stars who also hope to challenge for the famous "10 pounds of gold," most notably **Adam Pearce**, **Brent Albright**, and **Aaron Aguilera**, in addition to a slew of lesser-known grap-



Is English sensation Nigel McGuinness the man to do what Homicide, B.J. Whitmer, and KENTA could not? Just who has the combination of size and skill that can end the reign of 6'3", 297-pound ROH champion Takeshi Morishima?

plers from NWA affiliates across the continent. A few such up-and-comers to keep an eye on are NWA Anarchy champion **Chad Parham**, Australian menace **Bobby Jo Marshall**, "Mr. Mid-Atlantic" **Damien Wayne**, and "The Machine Gun" **Karl Anderson**. We'll monitor this situation to see whether the NWA really goes ahead with a tournament to declare a new champion.

Last month, we reported on the avenues for national exposure being opened up to many indy performers through their involvement with Wrestling Society X. Shortly after, MTV abruptly pulled the plug on the show after airing the ninth episode. Ten were taped, but the rest have yet to (and likely never will) be shown.

WSX creator **Kevin Kleinrock** has stated that he will pursue options for continuing the product in some capacity. If an outlet cannot be found, Southern California indy regular **Ricky Banderas** will go down as the second and final WSX champion. He defeated **Vampiro** for the title in the main event of episode number eight, with (what else?) a tombstone piledriver into an exploding coffin wrapped in barbed wire.

Though WSX might have gone out with only a literal "bang," the show did provide talent such as **Jack Evans**, **Human Tornado**, **Matt Sydal**, **Teddy Hart**, **Arik Cannon**, and others with an opportunity to show what they could do on a national stage, albeit briefly.

The exposure certainly didn't hurt **Colt Cabana**, who wrestled under a mask in WSX as **Matt Classic**. Cabana, long considered to be one of the most gifted all-around grapplers on the indy scene, was finally signed to a WWE developmental contract in early-April.

The Chicago-area native is expected to report to Ohio Valley Wrestling after completing his prior commitments. Could an eventual Second City Saints reunion with ECW's **C.M. Punk** and **Ace Steel** be in store? Stay tuned ...

Recent Title Changes:

Pro Wrestling Guerrilla, Van Nuys, CA, February 24: **El Generico** defeated **Human Tornado** to win the PWG heavyweight title ... **NWA Extreme Canadian Championship Wrestling, Vancouver, British Columbia, March 3:** **Scotty Mac** beat **Cremator** and champion **Moondog Manson** in a three-way match to win the ECCW hardcore title ... **Full Impact Pro, Crystal River, FL, March 10:** **Erick Stevens** won a tournament final over **Roderick Strong** to capture the newly established FIP Florida heritage title ... **World Pro Wrestling Association, Strathmere, NJ, March 10:** **Dynamite D** defeated **Harley Holiday** and **The Shovel Master** in a three-way to win the vacant WPWA title ... **Jersey All Pro Wrestling, Rahway, NJ, March 17:** **Low-Ki** emerged victorious in an eight-man gauntlet match, last defeating **Davey Richards** and surprise entrant **Rhino**, to claim the vacant JAPW heavyweight title ... **East Coast Wrestling Associ-**



Photo by Mike Lano

Wrestling Society X may no longer be airing on MTV, but that doesn't mean WSX Executive Producer Kevin Kleinrock (right) and Assistant Executive Producer Vampiro (left) are giving up. Kleinrock insists that he will continue to shop the show to alternative networks.

ation, Newark, DE, March 17: **Aden Chambers** defeated champion **Freak Nasty**, **Ace Darling**, and **Frederick of Hollywood** in a four-way to win the heavyweight title ... **International Wrestling Cartel, Elizabeth, PA, March 23:** **The Gambino Brothers** beat **Shiima Xion** and **Jason Gory** for the IWC tag team belts ... **International Wrestling Syndicate, Montreal, Quebec, March 24:** **The Green Phantom** and **Sexxy Eddy** defeated **The Hardcore Ninjaz** in a "Montreal Death" match to win the tag team championship ... **United States Wrestling Organization, Nashville, TN, March 30:** **Arrick Andrews** beat **Jerry Lynn** to win the television title ... **NWA Anarchy, Cornelia, GA, March 31:** **Chad Parham** defeated **Ace Rockwell**, **Slim J**, and **Jeremy Vain** in a "Double Jeopardy" match to simultaneously win the television title and retain his heavyweight championship. □

the international report

By Mike Spillane

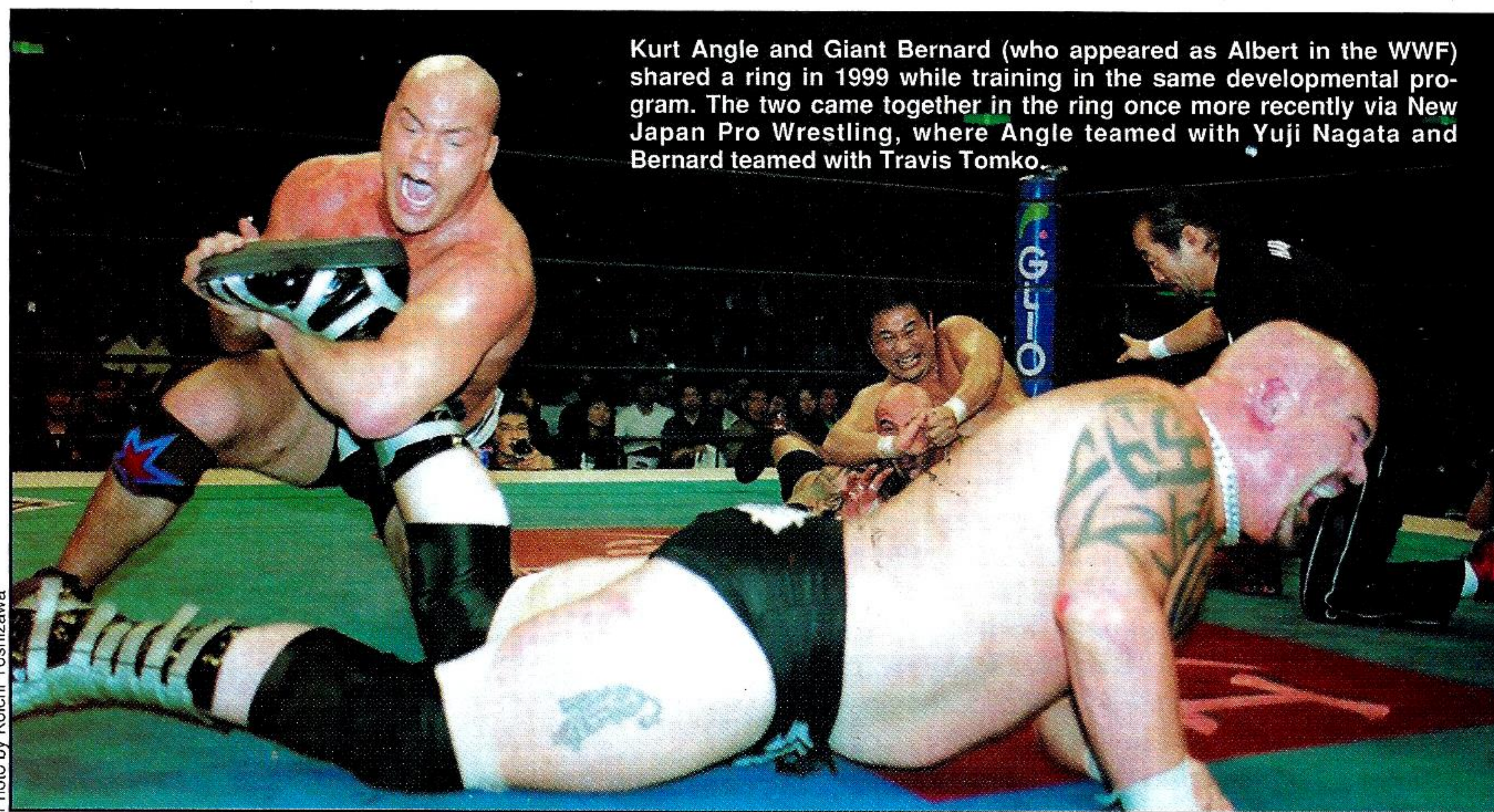
KURT ANGLE SHOCKED the domestic wrestling scene when he arrived in TNA at the end of 2006. Then, the announcement of his February 2007 debut for New Japan Pro Wrestling had the same kind of impact in Japan. Angle, in his debut with the company, teamed with **Yuji Nagata** to take on **Giant Bernard** and **Travis Tomko**, both former WWE stars. Angle knows both men well, having been part of the same developmental group as Bernard (then known as **Albert**) back in 1999 and currently a rival of Tomko in TNA, where Tomko is reprising his role as **Christian Cage**'s bodyguard. Angle and Nagata, with their combined mat skills, proved too much for their opponents. Nagata applied his Nagata lock II on Tomko, and Angle picked up Tomko's leg for an ankle-lock at the same time. The combination move caused an immediate tap-out.

In early-2007, quite a few Japanese wrestlers made their way to the United States, and more are on the way. For starters, Ring of Honor secured the services of **Takeshi Morishima**, the NOAH heavyweight, for a handful of shows in the month of February. He captured the ROH title from **Homicide** and looks to be a fixture with the company for the foreseeable future. His

upcoming schedule includes more title defenses both here and in his homeland.

Around the same time as Morishima's first visit, wrestlers from DDT, the Kaientai Dojo, and Osaka Pro visited Pennsylvania independent CHIKARA. During CHIKARA's "King Of Trios" weekend, talent from Mexico, Canada, and Europe, a total of seven Japanese wrestlers, and even a Japanese referee graced the CHIKARA ring. Fan favorite tag team **MIYAWAKI** and **Yoshiaki Yago** teamed with DDT star **KUDO** for tournament action, and the trio survived all the way to the finals. Former ARSION star **La Malscriada** faced **Allison Danger** while Osaka Pro masked man **Masamune** was involved in both singles and trios bouts. Also currently in the States from Japan are **Dick Togo**'s trainee, **Nobutaka Moribe**, and the flamboyant **Danshoku Dino**, who have been appearing for promotions such as West Virginia's IWA East Coast and the Pittsburgh-based International Wrestling Cartel. All in all, that makes for quite an array of international talent here in the U.S.

Perhaps most striking of all is the three-month tour of the U.S. that **Tiger Mask IV** plans to make this spring and summer. New Japan is sending Tiger Mask IV to



Kurt Angle and Giant Bernard (who appeared as Albert in the WWF) shared a ring in 1999 while training in the same developmental program. The two came together in the ring once more recently via New Japan Pro Wrestling, where Angle teamed with Yuji Nagata and Bernard teamed with Travis Tomko.

Photo by Koichi Yoshizawa

Japanese import Takeshi Morishima has settled into Ring of Honor, successfully wrestling the heavyweight title from Homicide. Morishima's schedule includes both U.S. and international defenses of his newly claimed belt.

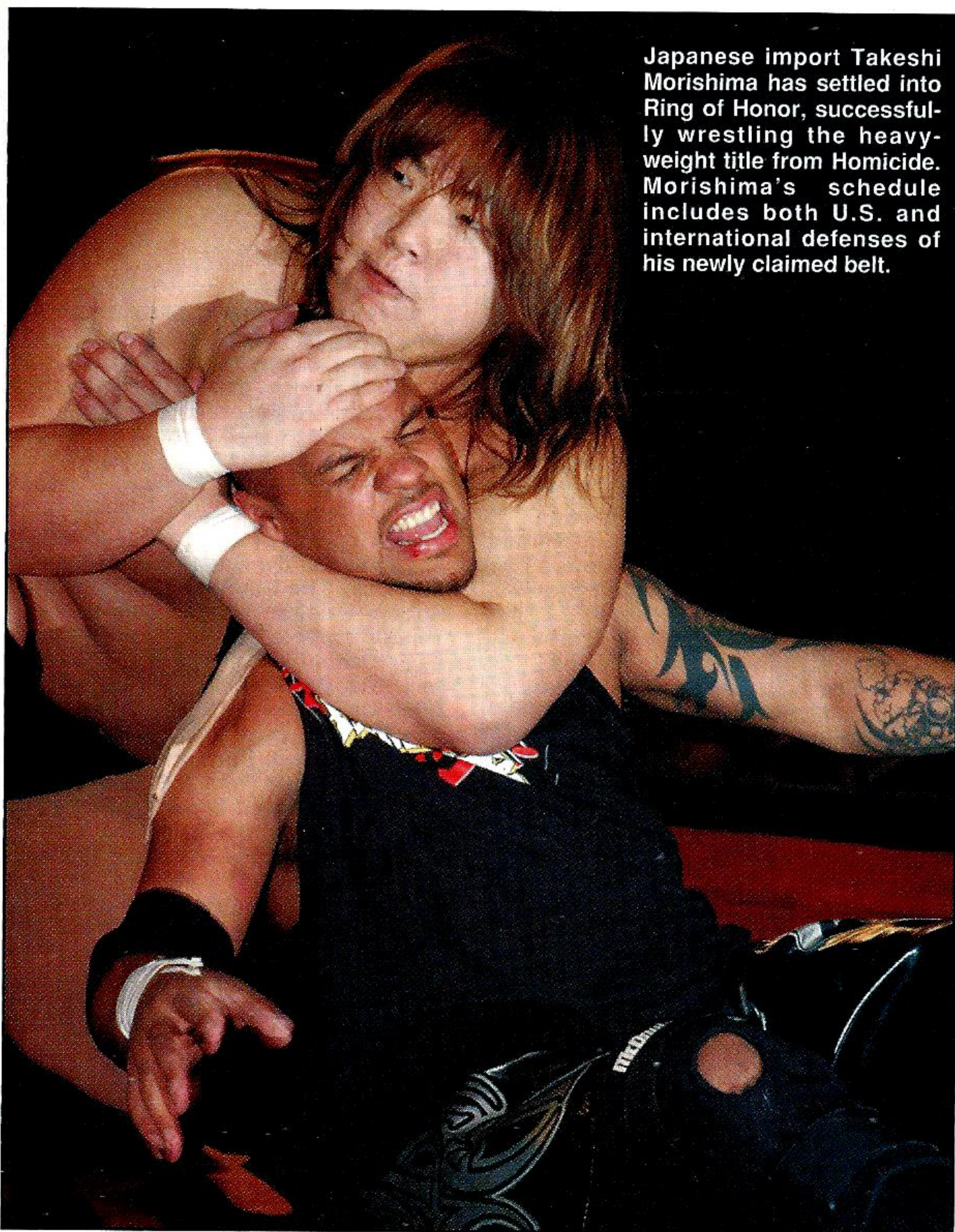


Photo by Joe Zanolle

Los Angeles, and he will visit all parts of the country, defending his NWA junior heavyweight title for promotions affiliated with the alliance. This Tiger Mask, a former IWGP junior champ, won back-to-back Best of the Super Juniors tournaments in 2004 and 2005.

AAA's version of **La Parka** (not to be confused with the original, now called **L.A. Park**) won the annual *Rey de Reyes* tournament, which translates to King of Kings. The event, which drew a staggering 17,000 fans, with thousands more turned away at the gate, featured a loaded card with many of Mexico's most famous names. In the *Rey de Reyes* finals, **La Parka**, **Octagon**, **Abismo Negro**, **Latin Lover**, **Fuerza Guerrera**, and TNA star **Rhino** all were in the same six-sided ring. Octagon and Guerrera were eliminated early, followed by Latin Lover. When Abismo and Rhino tried to double-team La Parka, La Parka escaped harm and Abismo Negro felt the gore. After an array of foreign objects—including tables and chairs—became part of the action, La Parka was the last man standing.

Also on the card, legendary trainer and respected veteran **Gran Apache** won the hair of his son-in-law, **Billy Boy**, from **The Barrio Boys** in a *lucha de apuestas*. Billy Boy is married to luchadora **Faby Apache**, the daughter of Gran Apache. The two had been feuding for some time. Earlier in the night, **Cuervo** and **Ozz**, two spooky characters and members of **La Secta**, won the AAA tag team title at the conclusion of a long, confusing tournament. They last defeated the teams of **Super Fly** and **Pegasso**, **Crazy Boy** and **Joe Lider**, and **Alan Stone** and **Zumbido** to capture the championship.

Officials with **Paco Alonso's** CMLL are worried about the future of **Mistico** in the company. In early-March, Mistico wrestled a non-televvised tryout match before a taping of WWE Smackdown in San Jose. Agents and other wrestlers were impressed by Mistico, who had been given a solid recommendation by **Rey Mysterio Jr.** CMLL officials were obviously unhappy about Mistico entertaining offers from WWE, but, as it turns out, he may be ineligible for an offer from WWE due to his contract. Matchmakers at CMLL, feeling betrayed by

Mistico's tryout matches, have bumped him down the card. Instead of Mistico, **Marco Corleone** (known as **Mark Jindrak** to U.S. fans) will now be the focus of CMLL's annual show to honor company founder **Salvador Lutteroth**, where Corleone will put his hair up against that of aging luchador **Universo 2000**.

Last but not least, the political career of Michinoku Pro founder **The Great Sasuke** has taken a definite upturn. Sasuke, who has served his Iwate prefecture (similar to a state or province) in the Japanese Diet (similar to the U.S. Congress) for the past few years, has set his sights on becoming governor of Iwate and announced his candidacy for the impending election. Throughout his career in politics, Sasuke has always worn his mask and will continue to do so in the race for the governor's chair. Originally, this caused quite a stir, even earning the high-flying legend some international headlines for donning his black hood in official chambers, but the Diet passed a statute that allows him to wear the mask while serving—because he was elected as The Great Sasuke and not by his real name. □

arena reports

We encourage promoters and readers to e-mail results to:

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Please try to utilize the exact format you see in the "Arena Reports" that follow; it will help us greatly and make it more likely that your report will be used.

Spotlight Card of the Month

PENNSYLVANIA

FRANKLIN—International Wrestling Cartel's Night of Legends card at Franklin High School: **Antonio Thomas** (with **Romeo Roselli** and manager **Chris Maverick**) beat **Vendetta** (with **Jimmy DeMarco** in his corner) ... Super indy champion **Troy Lords** beat **Nobutaka Moribe** ... **The Patriot** pinned **King Kaluha** ... **Dennis Gregory** beat **Hentai** ... **Jim Neidhart** beat **Salvatore Sincere** (with **King Kaluha**) by submission ... **The Hollywood Balds** beat **Dean Radford** & **Michael Facade** ... In a "Pittsburgh Legends" match, **Domenic DeNucci** (with **Bruno Sammartino**) beat **Larry Zbyszko** (with **Lord Zoltan**) ... Tag team champions **Mickey** & **Marshall Gambino** won a four-way singles elimination match over **Shiima Xion** & **Jason Gory**, **Eric Xtasy** & **Justin Idol**, and **The Cleveland Mafia** ... Heavyweight champion **Ricky Reyes** used a bearhug to force **Larry Sweeney** to submit ... **James Keenan** pinned **John McChesney** ... **Tito Santana** (with **Ivan Putski**) was declared the winner over **Greg Valentine** (with **Larry Sweeney**) when **Ivan Putski** gave **Larry Sweeney** the Polish hammer and covered **Sweeney** for the three-count. (03-24-07)

—"Spotlight" photos by **Timothy A. Walker**

UNITED STATES

ALABAMA

MOULTON—Outlaw Championship Wrestling at The Cell: **Jason Myers** beat **Tony Grande** ... **Damien Michaels** beat **One-Man Kru** ... **Jay Blade** beat **Disorderly** ... **Wild Irish Rose** & **Antney** retained the tag team title against **All-American Playboy** & **J-Dawg** ... **Dusty McWilliams** beat heavyweight champion **Ryder** in a non-title match ... **Anthony Wayne**, **Justin Raines**, & **Jay Blade** beat **Southern Wrecking Crew** (**Vinnie Mac** & **Michael J. Plezing**) & **All-American Playboy** (with **Mr. Hyde**). (03-31-07)

—**Lekisha Oliver-Burdine**

ARKANSAS

HARRISON—Mid-States Wrestling at the Fairgrounds Indoor Expo Building: **Cast-Iron Cothorn** (with **Boss Campbell**) beat

Mitch Carter ... **Jim Fallon** beat **Phil Lawrence** ... **Gary Gram** beat **El Matador Uno** (with **Boss Campbell** and **El Matador Dos**) ... **Jason Jones** beat **Jack Dalton** (with **Lexington Starr**) ... **Jake Boulder** beat **Cody Kelly** ... **Kenny Campbell** beat **Tony Gunn** ... **Christopher Vincent** beat **El Matador Dos** (with **Boss Campbell** and **El Matador Uno**) ... **Michael Barry** (with **Stephen E**) beat **Kraig Keesaman** ... **Sassy Merlot** beat **Lexington Starr** by DQ when **Starr** attacked **Merlot** with a chair before the bell ... **Cast-Iron Cothorn** won a 15-man battle royal to earn a title shot against Unified heavyweight champion **Kevin Lovejones**. Other entrants in the battle royal included **Kenny Campbell**, **Bubba Hall**, **Jim Fallon**, **El Matadors (Uno & Dos)**, **Christopher Vincent**, **Jason Jones**, **Cody Kelly**, **Michael Barry**, **Kraig Keesaman**, **Jack Dalton**, **Phil Lawrence**, **Gary Gram**, and **Boss Campbell**. (03-31-07)

—**Jeremy Rogers**

BRIGGSVILLE—Mid-States Wrestling at Fourche Valley Schools: **Gary Gram** beat **Matt Riviera** (with **Boyd Bradford**) ... **Cast-Iron Cothorn** (with **Boss Campbell**) beat **Dexter Hardaway** ... **Jim Fallon** beat **Jake Boulder** ... **Kenny Campbell** beat **Mitch Carter** ... **Jason Jones** & **Christopher Vincent** beat **The El Matadors (Uno & Dos)**, with **Boss Campbell** ... **Jake Boulder** won a battle royal. (04-08-07)

—**Gregory Willis**

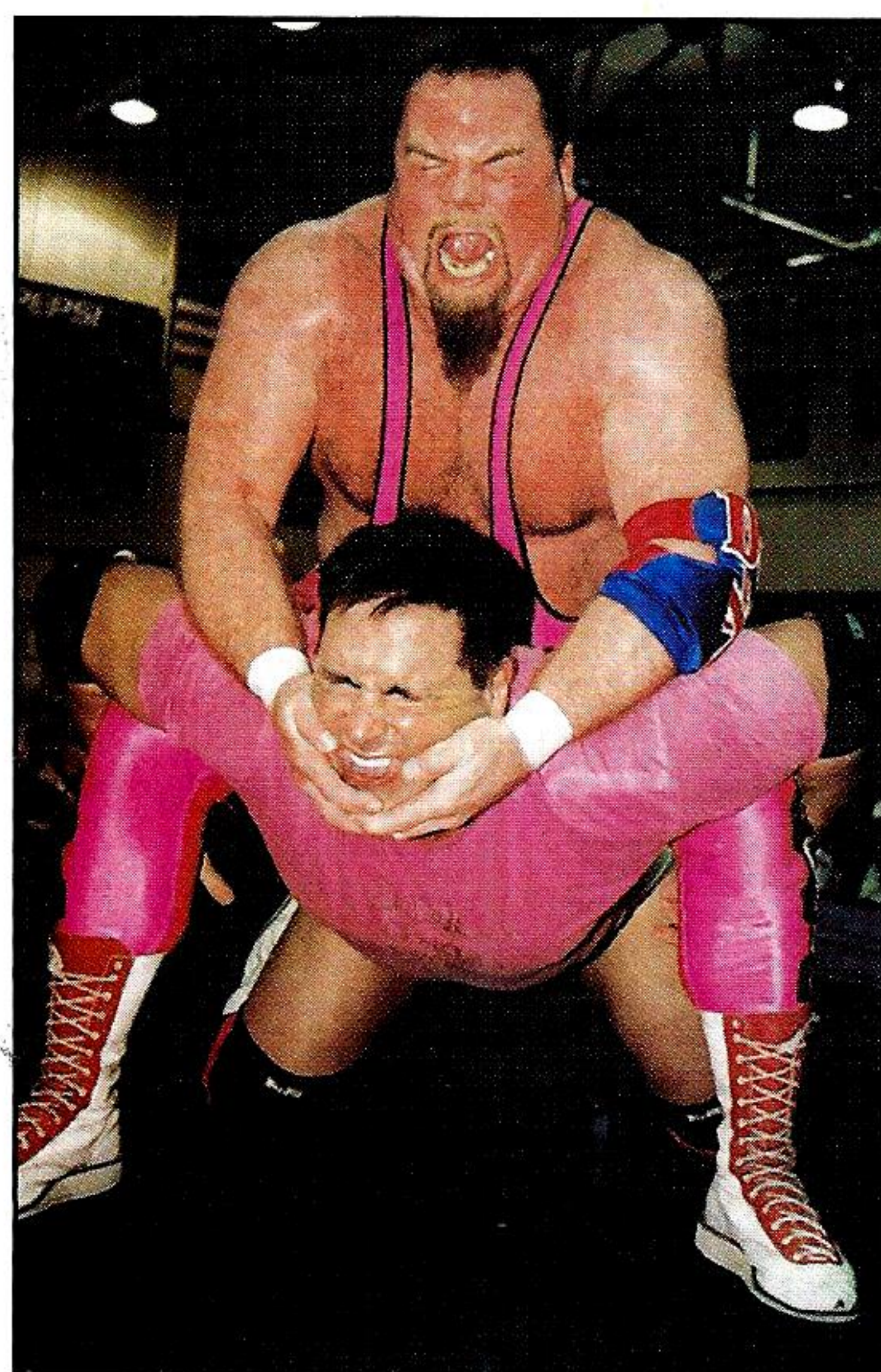
CALIFORNIA

BAKERSFIELD—APW at the Bakersfield Dome: **Los Chivos** beat **The Mafia** ... **J.J. Perez** won a four-way elimination involving **Matt Jackson**, **Billy Blade**, and **Derek Sanders** ... **Psicosis** beat **MPT** to win the Internet championship ... **Tito Aquino** & **Dana Lee** beat **Nate Rulez** & **A.J. Krisch** ... **Oliver John** beat **KAFU** to win the heavyweight championship ... **Traci Brooks** beat **Cheerleader Melissa**. (03-31-07)

—**Mike Lano**

DELAWARE

NEWARK—East Coast Wrestling Association at the Great Newark Boys and Girls Club: **The Guy With Red Hair** pinned **Robere Shields** (with **Mr. Ooh La La**) ... **Tommy Trouble** pinned **Chase Del Monte** ... **Frederick of Hollywood** & **Mike Reed** (with **Gus Grand**) beat **Glen Osbourne** & **Aden Chambers** ... **Bryan Logan** pinned **Ace Darling** to retain the Mid-Atlantic championship ... **Kermon the German** & **Max Von Bauer** (with **E.S. Easton**) beat **Sean Royal** & **Matt Logan** ... **Rob Eckos** beat **Dan Eckos** in a "Last Man Standing, Anything Goes" streetfight when **Dan** could not respond to a 10-count ... **Andrew Ryker**, **Scotty Charisma**, & **Chase Del Monte** beat the **Chick Magnets** ... **The**



The look on **Jim Neidhart's** face says that he has not lost his intensity after all these years. The look on **Salvatore Sincere's** face says pain. "The Anvil's" camel clutch was the deciding factor in this bout.

Secret Weapon (with **Sebastian Night**) beat **MEGA** via tap-out ... Aden Chambers beat **Freak Nasty**, Frederick of Hollywood, and Ace Darling in a "Lethal Lottery, Anything Goes, No Rules" match to win the heavyweight championship. (03-17-07)

—Joe Zanolle

FLORIDA

ORLANDO—TNA *Impact* taping at Universal Studios: **Jerry Lynn** beat **Alex Shelley**, **Shark Boy**, **Sonjay Dutt**, **Austin Starr**, and **Pete Williams** in a six-man elimination cage match to earn a shot at the X division title ... **James Storm** (with **Jacqueline Moore**) beat **Eric Young** ... **Kurt Angle** beat **Abyss** (with **James Mitchell**) in a "Winner Gets Tomko's Services" match. (03-29-07)

—Harry Burkett

ORLANDO—TNA *Impact* taping at Universal Studios: **Rhino** beat **Tomko** by pinfall in an "8 Mile" streetfight ... **VMK** was awarded a victory over **LAX** due to a DQ ... **Austin Starr** beat **Senshi** in a submission match. (04-05-07)

—Harry Burkett

GEORGIA

ROYSTON—APW at The City Gym: **Shadow Jackson** pinned **Aaron Lee** ... **Carnivus** beat **Dale Dwindle** & **Sly Storm** in a handicap match ... **Matt Sells** & **Ryan Michaels** (with **Kevin Duncan**) beat **Mike Pittman** & **Lance Christopher** ... Southern States champion **Chris Damian** pinned **Jeremy Vain** ... **Jason Blackman** pinned **Sal Rinauro** ... **Billy Buck** & **Chris King** beat **Andrew Pendleton III** & **J.T. Talent** ... In a four-way elimination match, **Austin Creed** pinned **Chris Blade**, **Adrian Hawkins** pinned **Austin Creed**, and **Slim J** pinned **Adrian Hawkins** to win the match ... **Shadow Jackson** beat heavyweight champion **Simon Sermon** by countout. (03-30-07)

—Brad Bates

MILLEDGEVILLE—GIWA at the National Guard Armory: **Mad Mac Davis** & **Johnny Camo** beat **Shawn Hunter** & **Dan Ivey** ... **Tommy 2 Much** beat **Jason Stone** ... **J-Rod** beat **Oko Nono** ... **KI Elite** beat **Lance Christian** and **Sean Logan** ... **Preston Paradise** beat **A.J. Steele** via reverse decision ... Heavyweight champion **Velvet Jones** beat **Cru Jones**. (03-31-07)

—Theo Simm

ROYSTON—Alternative Pro Wrestling at the City Gym: Heavyweight champion **Simon Sermon** pinned **Sly Storm** ... **The Hustle Squad** (**Nick Halen** & **Mike Pittman**) beat **Jeremy Vain** & **Chris Blade** ... Southern States champion **Chris Damian** pinned **Cruiser Lewis** ... **Carnivus** pinned **Aaron Lee** ... **Shadow Jackson** beat **Matt Sells** & **Ryan Michaels** (with **Kevin Duncan**) by DQ in a handicap match ... In a gauntlet match, **Dr. Hannibal Chase** pinned **Playa** ... **Dr. Hannibal Chase** pinned **J.T. Talent** ... **Chris King** pinned **Dr. Hannibal Chase** ... **Jeff Lewis** pinned **Chris King** ... **Jeff Lewis** pinned **ASAP** ... **Jeff Lewis** pinned

Billy Buck to win the gauntlet. (04-06-07)

—Brad Bates

ILLINOIS

FAIRVIEW HEIGHTS—FIST Wrestling at the K.C. Hall: **Brandon Espinosa** pinned **Hunter Matthews** ... **Tony Scarpone** pinned **C.J. McManus** ... **Tommy Knight** pinned **Green Masked Man** ... **Brian Ladd** pinned **Tommy Knight** ... **The Hybrids** fought **Zero Gravity** to a time-limit draw ... Midwest women's champ **MsChif** pinned **Daizee Haze** ... Heavyweight champ **Brian James** pinned **Dingo** ... **Windy City Wrecking Crew** pinned **The Hybrids** and **Zero Gravity** in an elimination tag match ... **Dan Velton** pinned **Delirious**. (03-25-07)

—Steven Lucas

CHICAGO—WWE Raw at The Allstate Arena: **Ashley Massaro**, **Torrie Wilson**, & **Candice Michelle** beat **Melina Perez**, **Victoria**, & **Jillian Hall** ... **C.M. Punk** beat **Kenny Dykstra** ... **Vince McMahon** (with help from **Umaga**, **Armando Alejandro Estrada**, **Trevor Murdoch**, **Lance Cade**, **Chris Masters**, and **Johnny Nitro**) beat **Bobby Lashley** in a no-DQ match ... **Randy Orton** & **Mr. Kennedy** beat **The Hardys** ... **The Great Khali** beat **Ric Flair** by DQ when **Carlito** interfered ... **The Undertaker** & **Batista** beat **Shawn Michaels** & **John Cena**. (03-26-07)

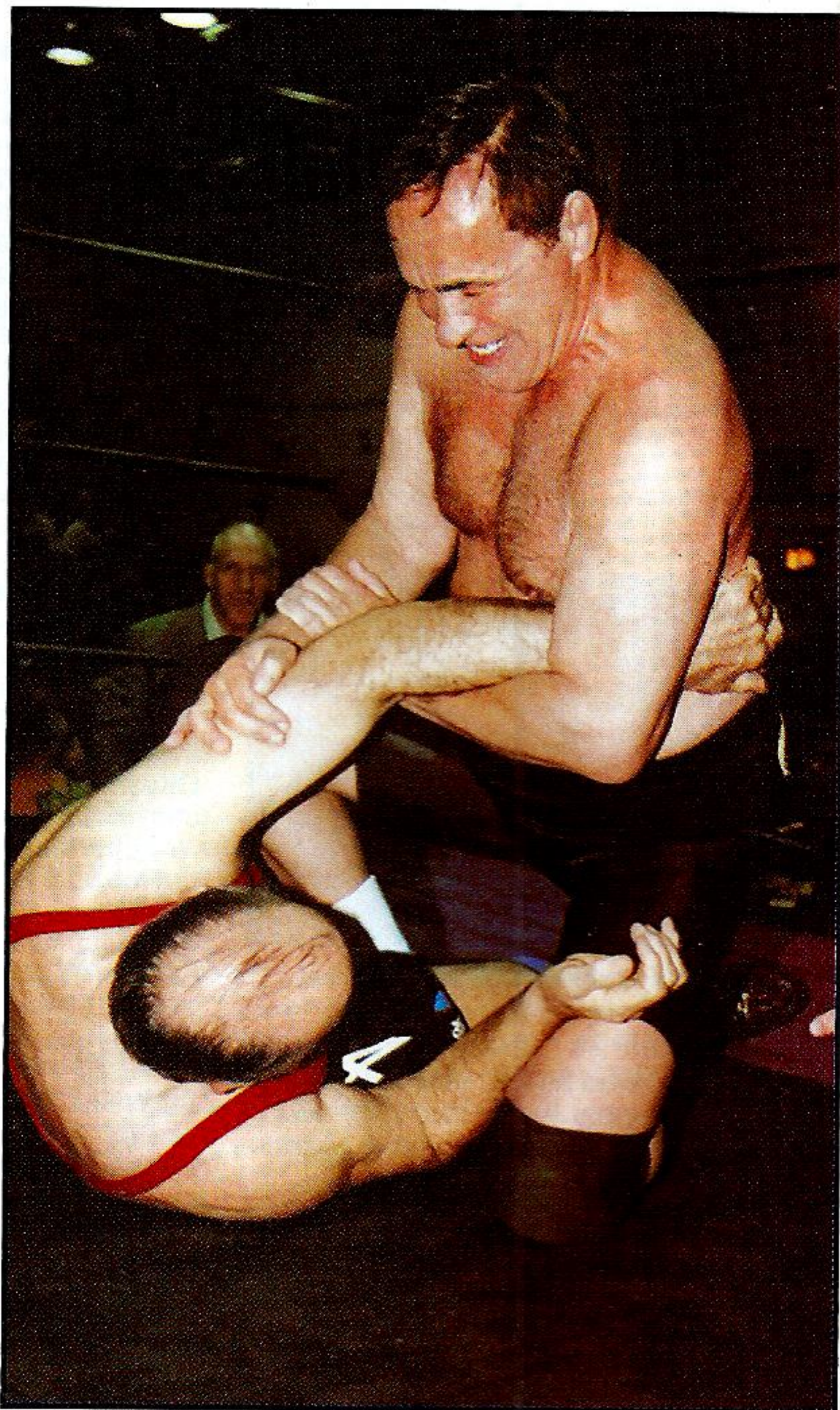
—Matt Brock

INDIANA

MADISON—AWA Supreme Championship Wrestling from the SCW Arena: **Mike Mondelli** pinned **Zayne** ... **Big & Tasty** beat **HNIC** ... **Tommie Foreman**, **Lee E. Roberts**, & **Luscious Loco** beat **The Regulators** & **C.J. Popp** in a six-man tag match ... **The Tibetan Strangler** and **Kamala** battled to a double countout ... **Chris Blayze** beat **Hamid Jihad** in two-out-of-three falls match ... Mid-America champion **Damien Divine** beat **Ricky Ruckus** by knockout ... **The Blackhearts** beat tag team champions **Above the Law** (**Draven** & **Stratlin**) ... Heavyweight champion **Billy Maverick** beat **Country Cousin Jimbo** by DQ. (03-31-07)

—Shawn Sands

FORT WAYNE—WWE Smackdown at War Memorial Coliseum: **Jamie Noble** & **Kofi Kingston** beat **La Resistance** (**Rob Conway** & **Sylvan Grenier**) ... **Ken**

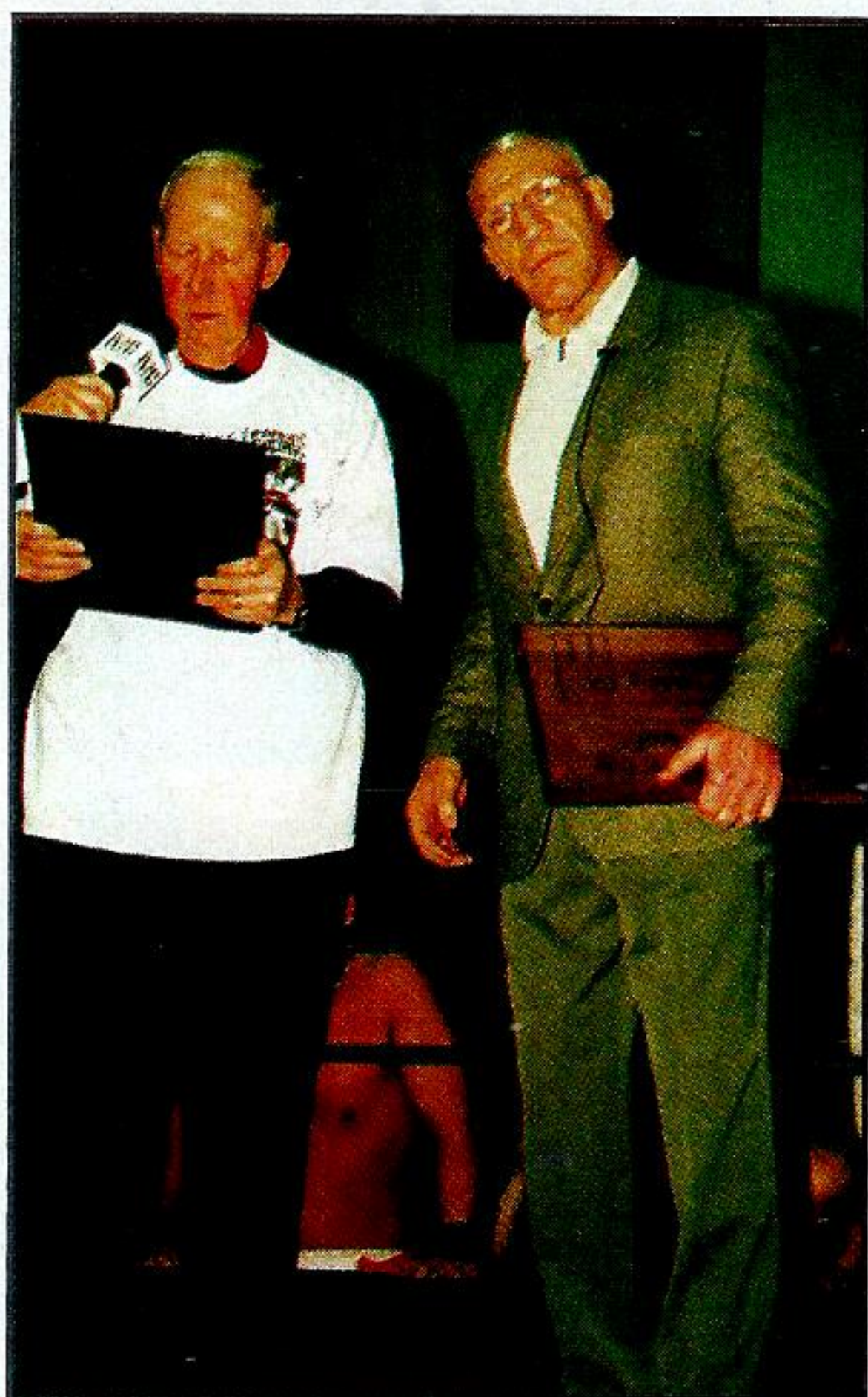


Dominic DeNucci, accompanied by **Bruno Sammartino** (shown at ringside), challenged **Larry Zbyszko** to a "Pittsburgh Legends" match. DeNucci defeated Zbyszko, who fled the arena in embarrassment.

Kennedy beat **Jeff Hardy** ... **Mike Mizanin** beat U.S. champion **Chris Benoit** with help from **Montel Vontavious Porter** in a non-title match ... **Matt Hardy** beat **King Booker** (with **Queen Sharmell**) ... **Kane** vs. **David Taylor** (with **William Regal**) never got started because **Kane** beat up **Taylor** & **Regal** when they attacked him before the match was to start ... Tag team champions **Brian Kendrick** & **Paul London** (with **Ashley Massaro**) beat **Gregory Helms** & **Chavo Guerrero** in a non-title match. (04-06-07)

—Liz Hunter

MADISON—AWA Supreme Championship Wrestling from the SCW Arena: TV champion **Nic Noble** pinned **Kid Genocide** ... **C.J. Popp** beat **Mr. Sunshine** ... **Ricky Ruckus** beat **Tommie Foreman** ... **The Regulators** and **Chris Blayze** & **Spazz** battled to a double countout ... **The Raver Nation** (**Biff Wellington III** & **Karma**) beat **C.J. Popp** & **Brandon Hunter** after **Above the Law** members **Damien Divine** & **Billy Maverick** "kidnapped" **Hunter** from ringside ... **Above the Law** (**Billy Maverick** & **Damien Divine**) vs. **Above the Law** (**Eric Draven** & **John Stratlin**) ended in a double-



Franklin mayor Robert B. Heller presents Sammartino with a key to the city and names March 24 "Bruno Sammartino Day." Bruno, who has wrestled in front of millions of people in stadiums the world over, said he was touched by this event.

disqualification after the referee found chains on both Draven and Maverick. (04-07-07)

—Shawn Sands

GREENSBURG—Wild Championship Wrestling Outlaws at the Parks Center: Midwest champion **Devan Monroe** beat **Pogo** ... **B.A. Skynard** defeated **DeCap** ... Ladies champion **Camron Star** pinned **Oola** ... **Big Red the Wrestling Preacher** beat **Jammer**, **Maniac**, & **Timmy Turner** in a handicap match ... **The Chicago Playaz** (**Boy Toy Bryan** & **Stu Early**) beat **Apocalypz** for the tag team title after **Bo Bo Brazil Jr.** failed to show up for his title defense ... **Chris Hamilton** pinned **Wampus Cat** ... Heavyweight champion **Don Basher** beat **Rob Ramer** by disqualification. (04-07-07)

—Randy Klemme

IOWA

NEWTON—Iowa Championship Wrestling at Iowa National Guard Armory: **Casanova** beat **Corwin Starr** ... **The Welfare Check Connection** (**Aaron Masterson** & **Zach Thompson**) beat **Jimmy Rockwell** & **Ricky Kwong** ... **Traci Brooks** beat **Allison Wonderland** ... **Devin Carter** beat **Mark Sterling** ... **Tyler Cook** & **Kraig Keesaman** beat **The Blue Chippers** (**Brian Ash** & **Gage Octane**) ... **Jeremy Wyatt** beat **Jerry Lynn** to win heavyweight title. (04-06-07)

—Zachary Grigg

PERRY—3XWrestling at National Guard Armory: **The Welfare Check Connection** (**Aaron Masterson** & **Zach Thompson**) beat **Jimmy Rockwell** & **Kraig Keesaman**

... **Casanova** beat **Ryan Slade**, **Krotch**, and **Hunter Matthews** in a gauntlet match to retain the cruiserweight title ... **Kraig Keesaman** won an over-the-top-rope battle royal ... **Marek Brave** beat **Shane Hollister** and **Tyler Black** in a triple-threat match to retain the AAW heavyweight title ... **Devin Carter** beat **Brian Ash** to win the heavyweight title ... **Tony Scarpone** & **Jerry Lynn** beat **Gage Octane** & **Danny Daniels**. (04-07-07)

—Zachary Grigg

KENTUCKY

LOUISVILLE—Ohio Valley Wrestling taping at the Davis Arena: **Mike Krue**, **Vladimer Koslov**, & **Boris Alexiev** beat **Mike Hutter**, **Nick Nemeth**, & **Chris Cage** ... **Serena** over **Beth Phoenix** ... **Mike Tolar** beat **Doug Basham** ... **Chet the Jet** & **Steve Lewington** beat **Pat Buck** & **Johnny Punch** ... **Rombola** beat **Lennox Lightfoot** ... **T.J. Dalton** & **Jaman Olivencia** beat **Los Locos** ... **Jake Hager** beat **K.C. James** ... **ODB** over **Katie Lea** ... **Mike Mondo** beat **Tomasso** ... **Justin LaRouche** & **Charles Evans** beat **Cody Rhodes** & **Sean Spears** to win the tag team championship. (04-11-07)

—Liz Hunter

MASSACHUSETTS

LOWELL—Chaotic Wrestling from the Polish American Veterans Club: **The Logan Brothers** beat **The Blowout Boys** ... **Chase Del Monte** pinned **Dr. Reginald Heresy** ... **Fred Sampson** pinned **Scott Reed** ... New England champion **Brian Fury** pinned **Handsome Johnny** ... Heavyweight champion **Brian Milonas** beat **Psycho** via forfeit ... **Tanya Lee** pinned **Lexus** ... **Alex Arion** & **Max Bauer** beat **Jason Blade** & **Kid Mikaze** in a two-out-of-three falls match to become the new tag team champions. (03-30-07)

—Dave Ratty

SANDWICH—New World Wrestling at the High School: **Pierre Vachon** won a battle royal ... **Damien Vachon** beat **Mark the Canadian** in a submission match ... **Cousin Larry Huntley**, **Cousin Sonny Roselli**, & **Bull Moose Calhoun** beat **Moondog Maximus**, **Ka Hoku**, & **Eric Atlas** ... **The Outpatient** & **Crazy Chainsaw Bastard** beat **Dan Bidondi** & **Big Money** in a hardcore match to win the tag team title ... **King Kong Bundy** pinned **Pierre Vachon** ... **Tim Pittman** pinned **Mia Love** ... U.S. champ **The Texas Outlaw** beat **Rick Fuller** by disqualification ... **Osirus** beat **Eric Shred** by reverse decision ... Heavyweight champ **Don Vega** beat **Jimmy Jact Cash** by submission. (03-31-07)

—Shawn O'Domski

FALL RIVER—Top Rope Promotions at the Police Athletic League: **Jason Blade** pinned **Gino Giovanni** ... **Dan Strykes** and **Paul Lombardi** battled to a no-contest ... **Antonio Thomas** pinned **Grayson Alexander** ... **Johnny Angel** beat **Bret Williams** ... **Nikki Roxx** & **Luscious Latasha** beat **Lexus** & **Barbie** ... **Greg Valentine** beat **B.K. Jordan** ... **Brother Runt** & **Vain** beat **Simon Diamond** &

Gregory Edwards ... Interstate champ **Big Daddy Bravo** pinned **Buck Nasty** ... Tag team champs **Mike Bennett** & **Bryce Andrews** (with **Grayson Alexander**) beat **Shane** & **Eric Alden** (with **The Director**) ... **Michael Sain** pinned **Freight Train** ... **Rick Fuller** pinned **Jay Jaillet** in a lumberjack match to win the heavyweight title. (04-06-07)

—Shawn O'Domski

BELLINGHAM—Top Rope Promotions at the Middle School: **Jason Blade** pinned **Vain** ... Interstate champ **Big Daddy Bravo**, **Dan Strykes**, & **Grayson P. Alexander** beat **The Alden Brothers** & **Freight Train** ... **Jay Jaillet** pinned **Paul Lombardi** ... **Antonio Thomas** & **Romeo Roselli** beat tag team champs **Mike Bennett** & **Bryce Andrews** in a non-title match ... **Luscious Latasha** & **B.K. Jordan** beat **Lexus** & **Johnny Angel** ... **Brother Runt** pinned **Gregory Edwards** in a streetfight ... Heavyweight champ **Rick Fuller** beat **Nick Steel** by disqualification ... **Jimmy Snuka** pinned **Michael Sain**. (04-07-07)

—Shawn O'Domski

MICHIGAN

GRAND RAPIDS—ECW at the Van Andel Arena: **Rob Van Dam** beat **Elijah Burke** in a captain's match ... **Gene Snitsky** beat **Mahoney** ... **Ken Kennedy**, **Randy Orton**, **Finlay**, & **King Booker** beat **The Hardy Boyz**, **C.M. Punk**, & **Edge**. (03-27-07)

—Liz Hunter

GRAND RAPIDS—WWE Smackdown at Van Andel Arena: **The Majors Brothers** beat **Deuce** & **Domino** (with **Cherry**) ... **The Great Khali** vs. **Matt Hardy** ended in a no-contest ... **Finlay** (with **Hornswoggle**) beat **Ken Kennedy** ... **Montel Vontavious Porter** beat **Viko Vatamongo** ... **Jeff Hardy** beat **Randy** after interference from **Edge** ... **Ashley**, **Mickie James**, **Maria**, **Candice**, & **Torrie** beat **Melina**, **Victoria**, **Jillian**, **Kristal Marshall**, & **Michelle** ... **C.M. Punk** beat **King Booker** (with **Queen Sharmell**). (03-30-07)

—Liz Hunter

WALDRON—Championship International Wrestling at Waldron High School: **Ash** beat **Michael Elgin** ... **Doink** & **Nacho Libre** beat **The Wild Stallions** (**Jaded Jim Rivard** & **Mr. Main Event**) ... U.S. champion **Explicit Xavier Justice** defeated **Ricky Fontaine** ... In a no-DQ match, **Dave DuPonte** used brass knuckles to beat **Joe Doering** ... In a barbed wire match, **The Elite** (tag team champions **The Clash** with **Conrad Kennedy III**) beat **The War Machines** (**Nitro** & **Mauler**) and **Explicit Xavier Justice**. (04-07-07)

—Zach Kerr

MISSISSIPPI

CORINTH—TNA at Crossroads Arena: X division champion **Chris Sabin** beat **Sonjay Dutt** ... **Chris Harris** & **Gail Kim** beat **James Storm** & **Jackie Moore** ... **Christopher Daniels** beat **Petey Williams** ... **Brother Ray** beat **The Naturals** in a handicap match ... **Rhino** beat **A.J. Styles** in a Mississippi streetfight ... **Kurt Angle**

beat **Abyss** ... NWA World champion **Christian Cage** beat **Samoa Joe**.
(04-07-07)

—Craig Allen

MICHIGAN

DETROIT—WrestleMania 23 at Ford Field: **Ken Kennedy** won a "Money In The Bank" ladder match ... **The Great Khali** beat **Kane** ... **Chris Benoit** beat **MVP** ... **The Undertaker** beat **Batista** to win the Smackdown World heavyweight title ... **The Originals** beat **The New Breed** ... **Bobby Lashley** (with **Donald Trump**) beat **Umaga** (with **Mr. McMahon**) in a hair-vs.-hair match with special guest referee **Steve Austin** ... Women's champion **Melina Perez** beat **Ashley Massaro** ... Raw World champion **John Cena** beat **Shawn Michaels**.
(04-01-07)

—Frank Ingiosi

NEW JERSEY

ROCHELLE PARK—ECPW at the Knights of Columbus Hall: **Andrew Anderson** beat **Paul Enormous** and **Brolly** in a triple-threat match ... **Lucky Zaccane** beat **Padrone** in a taped-fist match ... **Red Hot Russ & Johnny Thunder** beat **The Repeat Offenders** ... **Dan Mandini** beat **Kevin Apollo** ... Light heavyweight champion **Gil Quest** beat **Judas Young** and **Dan Da Man**.
(03-30-07)

—Adam Polodori

NORTH CAROLINA

WADESBORO—World Class Extreme Wrestling at the HMOC Center: **Tito Rain** beat **Craven Slater** ... Heavyweight champion **Corey Edsel** beat **Steven Dillinger** (with **Stephen B. Esquire III**) ... **Damian Kage** beat **Dick Foley** after using a foreign object ... **Hangtime** beat **Josh Hunter** ... **Cletus Bass & Z. Hyde** beat **Ali Steele & Tyron Knox** to win the tag team title ... Extreme champion **Tommy Vandal** beat **Johnny Vandal** ... New Class champion **Tre G.** beat **Kid Evil** by submission ... Heavyweight champion **Corey Edsel** beat **Aaron Devil** by tap-out.
(03-31-07)

—Ciara Patton

SALISBURY—Exodus Wrestling Alliance from Salisbury National Guard Armory: **Charlie Dreamer** beat **Chris Guerrero** ... **Eric St. Clair** beat **Mighty Hojo** ... **Jimmy Jack Funk Jr.** beat **Jake Manning** ... Junior champion **George South Jr.** beat **Charlie Dreamer** ... **Red Scorpion** beat **The Shooter** ... **Bobby Houston** beat champion **George South Sr.** to win the heavyweight title.
(04-05-07)

—Michael Carpenter

OHIO

TOLEDO—WWE Raw at Toledo Sports Arena: **Jeff Hardy** beat **Kenny Dykstra** ... **Jim Duggan** beat **Viscera** ... **Daniel Rodimer** beat **Eugene** ... **The Majors Brothers** (**Brian & Brett Majors**) beat **The World's Greatest Tag Team** (**Shelton Benjamin & Charlie Haas**) ... **Ashley Massaro** beat women's champion **Melina Perez** in a non-title match ... **Carlito & Ric Flair** beat **M-N-M** (**Johnny Nitro & Joey Mercury**) ... **The Great Khali** beat **Kane**

by **DQ** ... Raw World champion **John Cena** beat **Randy Orton**, with **Rick Steamboat** as the referee.
(03-25-07)

—Jason Talley

ELYRIA—Mega Championship Wrestling at Lorain County Community College: **Christian Vaughn** beat **Marion Fontaine** ... **J.T. Lightning & Chris Cronus** beat **Klub X-treme** ... **Sassy Stephie** vs. **Stacy Hunter** ended in a no-contest ... **Dublava** beat **Shawn Blaze** and **T.J. Dynamite** in a triple-threat match to win the vacant light heavyweight title ... **Da Munchies & Rebis** beat **Carlton Kaz, Jabari, & Lou Roberts** ... **Mark Wolf** won a 20-man battle royal to receive a U.S. title shot ... Brass knuckles champ **Brandon X** beat **Jason Bane** ... **Faith In Nothing** beat tag champs **Los Scrubs** to win the title ... U.S. champ **Chris Kole** beat **Mark Wolf**.
(03-31-07)

—Johnny James

RUSSELLVILLE—WWC King of Extreme DVD Taping at the Rambler Center: **Onyx** beat **The Boogeyman Classic** ... **Astonishing Aaron Williams** beat **Scary Gary** ... Tag team champions **Devlin Anderson & Dave Nevada** beat **High School Heroes** ... **Kara Kildare** beat **Janelle Sinclair** in a women's chain match, with special guest referee **Brian Jennings** ... **Jon Moxley** vs. **Jake Ashworth** ended in a no-contest ... Heavyweight champion **Benjamin Kimera** beat **J.T. Stahr** ... **Kenny Lucas** won the 2007 King of Extreme over **Andre Heart, Deja Vu, Scary Gary, Astonishing Aaron Williams, Terek the Legend, Devlin Anderson, and Brian Jennings**.
(03-31-07)

—Jeremiah Young

DAYTON—WWE Raw at E. J. Nutter Center: Tag team champions **Shawn Michaels & John Cena** won a 10-team battle royal against **Cryme Tyme, The Highlanders, Kenny Dykstra & Chris Masters, Jim Duggan & Eugene, King Booker & Finlay, Deuce & Domino** (with **Cherry**), **Chavo Guerrero Jr. & Gregory Helms, Rob Van Dam & Sabu, and Elijah Burke & Matt Striker** ... **Jonathan Coachman** came out and ordered **Cena & Michaels** to defend in a second 10-team battle royal ... **The Hardy Boyz** won the tag team championship in a second 10-team battle royal against **Michaels & Cena, Lance Cade & Trevor Murdoch, Johnny Nitro & The Miz, Viscera & Val Venis, Brian Kendrick & Paul London, Chavo Guerrero Jr. & Gregory Helms, William Regal & Dave Taylor, Tommy Dreamer & The Sandman, and Marcus Cor Von & Kevin Thorn** ... **Ric Flair & Carlito** (with **Torrie Wilson**) beat **The World's Greatest Tag Team** (**Shelton Benjamin & Charlie Haas**) ... **The Great Khali** beat **Super Crazy** ... ECW champion **Bobby Lashley** beat **Umaga & Armando Alejandro Estrada** in a handicap match.
(04-02-07)

—Matt Brock

CLEVELAND—Wrestling All Stars Promotion at Turner's Hall: **Rebis** beat **Jim Roberts** ... **Britney McMichael** beat **Krystal Meth** to win the women's title ...

Corey James & T-Dawg beat **Jamie Starr & Tommy Banks** ... Cruiserweight champ **Barry Saggiatarious** beat **Hobo Joe** ... **Spectre** beat **Hellrazor** and **El Diablo** in a triple-threat match ... **Rage & Blackout** beat tag champs **Gregory Iron & Matthew Justice** to win the tag title ... TV champ **Luis Diamante** beat **Aftermath** ... **J.T. Lightning & Da Munchies** beat **Frankie Andolini, Rogue, & Raptor** ... **Johnny Blaze** beat **Durdy Sanchez, The Bouncer, Curt Fury, Johnny Gargano, and Shawn Blaze** in six-man elimination style steel cage match to win the universal title.
(04-07-07)

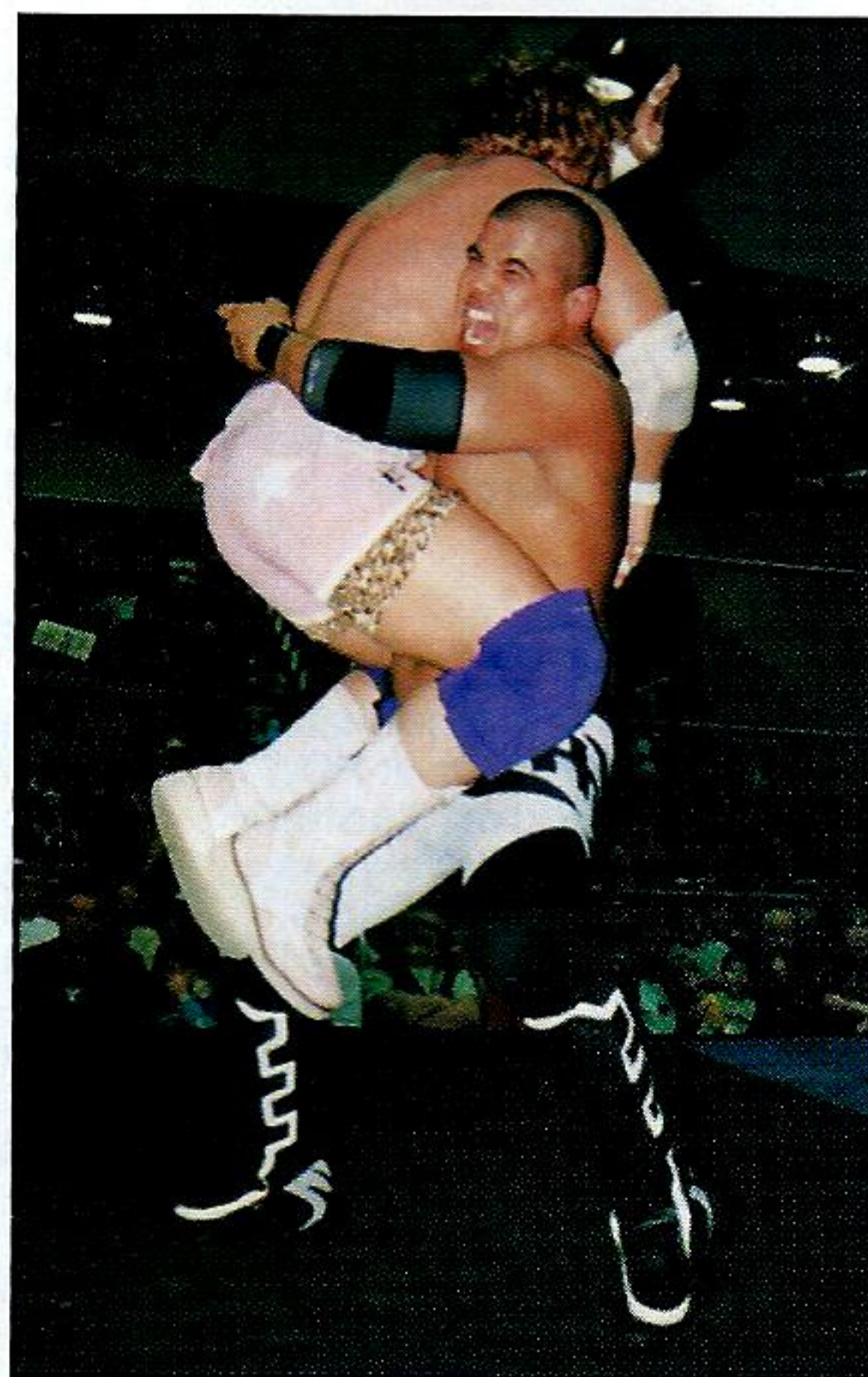
—Johnny James

OKLAHOMA

MIDWEST CITY—Mid-South Wrestling Alliance at the Golden Goose Flea Market: **Shane Rawls, Eric Rose, & Draven Cross** beat **The Bold and the Beautiful** (**Tommy Smash & Brian Grimm**) & cruiserweight champion **Cody Jones** ... **Jeff Knight** beat **Outlaw** ... Oklahoma champion **Tyler Bateman** beat **Mr. Mid-South 4** ... **Aaron Neil** beat **The New Age Syndicate** (**Scott & Shawn Sanders**) in a handicap match ... **The South Side Soul Assassins** (**Tyson James & 3rd Rail**) beat tag team champions **The Patriots** (**Bad Boy & Glen Steel**) ... **Brad Michaels** and heavyweight champion **Ryan Davidson** wrestled to a no-contest.
(3-25-07)

—C.M. Burnham

OKLAHOMA CITY—Sooner World Class Wrestling at the Underground Arena: **Stevie Caballero** beat **Trailer Park Trash** (**J.C. & K.C. with Jessi Jersey**) ... **Striker** beat **Michael James** (with **Talon**), **Tyson James, Glen Steel, and 3rd Rail** in a fatal five-way match to determine the number-one contender to the heavyweight title ... Hardcore champion **Kareem Sadat** beat



In a further tribute to the great Sammartino, IWC heavyweight champion **Ricky Reyes** forces **Larry Sweeney** to submit to a bearhug.

Kevin James and Jeff Knight in a triple-threat match ... Terry Montana beat Sooner Xtreme champion **Dexter Hardaway** (with Talon) by DQ ... **Prophet** beat **AWOL** by DQ ... **Big Daddy Moore** beat **Luc Lapointe** (with Ray Martinez) ... **James Warbois** beat **Tommy Smash** in a no-DQ match ... **Rick Garrett** beat **Outlaw** and champion **Luscious Larry** in a triple-threat match to win the title. (03-31-07)

—C.M. Burnham

TEXAS

SEGUIN—Anarchy Championship Wrestling's Siege on Seguin at The Fiesta Ballroom: **Chad Thomas** beat **Berry** ... **Showcase Shance Williams** and **Darin Childs** battled to a no-decision ... **Rexx Reed** beat **Spiro** ... **Hugh Rogue** beat **Chuey Martinez** in an "Unlucky 13" match ... **Doink the Clown** beat **Ricky Rhodes** ... The Children of Pain retained the tag team title in a four-way elimination against **Double Trouble**, **KissyBoots**, and **Showcase Shance Williams & Chad Thomas** ... Heavyweight champion **Showtime Summers** defeated **Mitch Ryder**. (03-29-07)

—Barry Yount

PORT NECHES—Gulf Coast Power Pro Wrestling from the National Guard Armory: **Max Muscles** beat **Sexy Shawn Stern** ... The Pipeline X-Press beat **Jason Black & Tony Vega** ... **Chris James** vs. **Cow Dog** ended in a non-contest ... **ZenZen** pinned **Gonzo** ... The **FU Man Kru** won the tag title by defeating **Major Eddie Lee & Panther** ... **Cow Dog** won a six-man scramble over **Jared Steele**, **ZenZen**, **Steven Cody**, **Max Muscles**, and **Chris James**. (03-31-07)

—Mike Garcia

ARLINGTON—Professional Championship Wrestling Full Throttle at PCW Arena: **J.T. LaMotta** beat **Andy Dalton** ... **Mike Foxx** beat **Franco D'Angelo** by DQ ... **James Johnson** beat **Macho Mike** ... **Apocalypse** beat **Mace Malone** ... Heavyweight champion **Nobe Bryant** beat **Mad Dog** ... **Mike Foxx & Action Jackson** beat **Franco D'Angelo & Tim Storm** ... **Wally Darkmon** beat **Stephen Murphy** in a barbed wire hell match. (03-31-07)

—Rob Moore

ARLINGTON—Professional Championship Wrestling Full Throttle at PCW Arena: **Mike Foxx** beat **Viktor Tadlock** ... **Steve DeMarco** beat **Apocalypse** ... **Brandon Collins** beat **Aaron Eagle** ... **Diamond Dave** beat **Macho Mike** by DQ ... **Action Jackson** beat **Angel of Sinn** ... TV champion **Luke Bronson** beat **James Johnson** ... Tag team champions **Wally Darkmon & Shadow** (**Lance Hoyt**) beat **Nobe Bryant & Stephen Murphy**. (04-07-07)

—Rob Moore

CLEBURNE—New Age Wrestling at the Cleburne Sportatorium: **Spoiler 2000** beat **Michael Faith** ... Lightweight champion **Mercenary** beat **Redneck Bash** ... Women's champion **Roxy** beat **Bobby**

Midnight ... **Max Muscles** beat **Duke Hazzard** ... **Seth Shai** beat **Viper** ... Texas champion **Maddog 50** beat **Tejano Kid** by DQ. (04-07-07)

—Kokina Lynn

VIRGINIA

FLOYD—National Independent Championship Wrestling at the NICW Wrestling Academy: **Ace England** beat **Damien James** ... **Hillbilly Helbert** beat **Drake Tungston** and **Darius Mackleford** in a triple-threat match ... **Boris Zhukov & Eclispo** won by pinfall over **Scotty Weddle & Foxy Roxy** ... U.S. champion **Dustin Daniels** beat **Knightstalker** ... **Wyld Chyld & Scott Lee** beat **Ken Steel & Damien James** to become the new tag team champions. (04-07-07)

—Kenny Pack

WEST VIRGINIA

HAMLIN—West Virginia Mountaineer Wrestling at the Lincoln County High School Gym: **Matt Riviera** beat **The Nightmare** ... **Tojo Yamamoto Jr.** beat **Nasty Bill** by DQ ... **Matt Riviera** beat **Rodney Grimes** ... **Tracy Smothers & Worm** beat **Ricky Morton & Don Bass** ... **Jerry Lawler** pinned **Buddy Landel** (with Kim Chee). (04-05-07)

—Boyd Bradford

INTERNATIONAL

ENGLAND

BRISTOL—Pro E.V. Promotions at the Greenway Centre: **Hellbunny & Bill Duffy** wrestled **Stacy & Atom** to a no-contest ... **Jonny the Body** beat **Dean Dixon** ... **Danny Shooter** beat **BBQ T-Bone** ... **Tommy Steakhouse** ... **Sam Daniels** pinned **Matt Jarrett** ... **Them Mexicans** beat **The Sky High Express** ... **Justin Sane** won a Bristol battle royal. (03-30-07)

—John Stallard

STAMFORD—Wrestling Rumble at the Blackstones Maquee: **Jimmy Frost** pinned **Kade Callous** ... **Maddog Maxx** beat **Jonny the Body** ... **Glhoom & The Dragon** beat **Mark Mignot & Nero** ... **Leon X** pinned **The Agent** ... **Jonny the Body** won a Blackstone brawl battle royal. (03-31-07)

—John Stallard

MEXICO

MONTERREY—WWE Smackdown/ECW at Plaza de Toros: U.S. champion **Chris Benoit** beat **Montel Vontavious Porter** ... **Kristal Marshall** beat **Jillian Hall** and **Ariel** in a bikini contest ... The **Originals** (**Tommy Dreamer**, **The Sandman**, **Sabu**, & **Rob Van Dam**) beat **The New Breed** (**Elijah Burke**, **Marcus Cor Von**, **Matt Striker**,

& **Kevin Thorn**) ... **Matt Hardy** beat **King Booker** (with **Queen Sharmell**) ... **Mark Henry** beat **Gregory Helms** ... **Smackdown World champion Batista** beat **Ken Kennedy**. (03-25-07)

—Matt Brock

PUERTO RICO

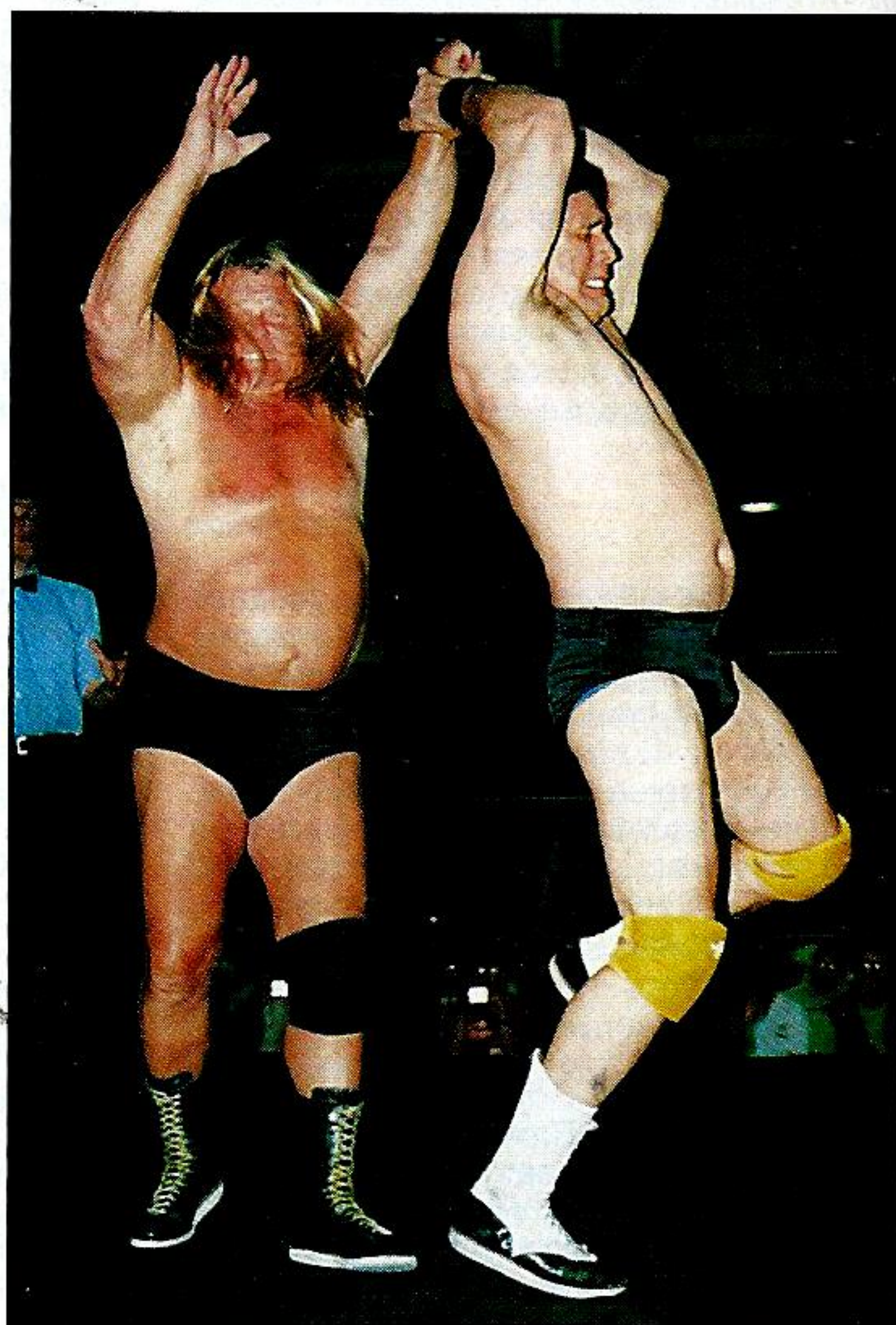
MANATI—WWC at the Acropolis: **Los Adorables** beat **Hammett & Payaso Titin**, with **Jessie the Latin Freebird** as referee ... **Chris Joel** beat **2-Chris** ... **William de la Vega & Rick Rick** beat **D'Jour** after the referee was attacked by **Jessie** ... **Rico Suave** beat **Superstar Romeo** by DQ as **Romeo** wildly attacked **Rico** with brass knuckles ... **Crazy Rudy** beat **Voodoo Man** by DQ after **Terror Incorporated** came to attack him; **Eddie Colón & Fireblaze** made the save ... **Black Pain** beat **Noriega** ... **Ash** beat **Fireblaze** with help from friend **Lucky 7** ... **Apollo & Eddie Colón** beat **Alofa & Bronco**. (03-24-07)

—Mike Lano

SCOTLAND

DUNDEE—SWE at the Kirkton Centre: **Mike Austin** beat **Jonny Wrath** in a dog chain match ... **Randy Valentine** pinned **Braveheart** ... **Jay Phoenix** beat **Kid Fight** ... **Ian Black** beat **The Red Devil** to become **BSWC** champion ... Heavyweight champion **Chaz Phoenix** beat **Jonny the Body** ... **Jonny the Body & Braveheart** beat **Randy Valentine & Chaz Phoenix**. (03-24-07)

—John Stallard



Renewing their WWF feud of the 1980s, **Tito Santana** executes a pump-handle against **Greg Valentine**. It was the wrestlers' respective seconds, **Larry Sweeney** and **Ivan Putski**, who determined the outcome of the match.

PWI classic

From the March 1979 issue of *Inside Wrestling*



ANDRE SQUASHES ANOTHER VICTIM

Why I Hate Andre The Giant

In his own words, Ernie Ladd tells the real reason he's consumed with hatred for Andre the Giant. It's an ugly, brutal, shocking confession. Yet no wrestling fan can afford to miss it

By Ernie Ladd

AS A SUPERIOR being, I find it beneath my regal presence to comment on a low-life like Andre the Ugly. But I have to face Andre the Ugly in the ring. I don't like it. But they gave me a lot of money to wrestle inferiors.

But Andre the Ugly is not just an inferior. I hate Andre the Ugly. I want the whole world, all of those who can read, all three of you, to know why I hate Andre.



Ladd was one of the few men who didn't hesitate to face Andre the Giant, whether it was at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles or Madison Square Garden in New York, where he was managed by The Grand Wizard (left). But, once the bell rang, Ladd was often struck by a case of the jitters (above).

Now the cheapskates who run this rag magazine aren't paying me to write this. I will do this for free, another humanitarian act for which I have grown famous.

First off, I hate anyone who is ugly. I know that few men come close to me in looks, but Andre is grotesque. He looks like a piece of corned beef left out in the sun too long. He looks like an old rug in the attic. He looks like what's under the bottom of a rock.

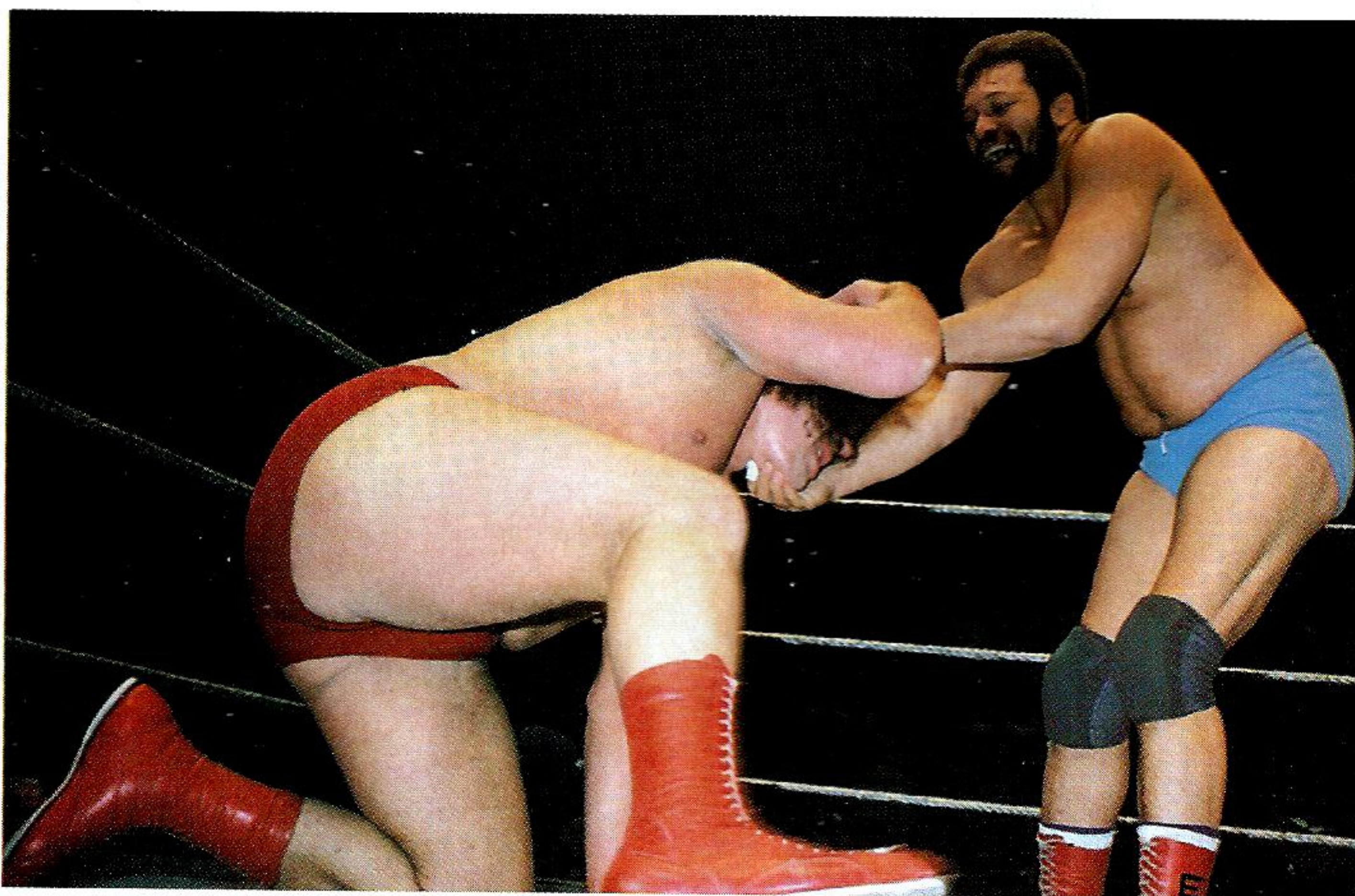
Ugly people make me sick. They should be destroyed. Ugly people only marry other ugly people and then have even uglier children. And I have to look at them. That's one reason I hate Andre the Ugly.

Next reason, as if that's not enough, is his body. Have you ever seen anything so misshapen? There's no reason why

a tall person can't have a great body. I'm a perfect example, in every sense. He shames those of us who work on our bodies. Look at it! It's disgusting! And I have to look at it up close.

Do you think I like being in the sport with a gruesome baboon like Andre the Ugly? I have a magnificent physique. It is perfectly proportioned. I have tremendous strength. What does Andre have except this overdeveloped body?

That's another reason I hate Andre the Ugly.



Although Ladd briefly dominated Andre in the ring at times, he never managed to score a victory over the "Eighth Wonder Of The World." Although his "King Of Wrestling" character was quite over the top, Ladd was known as a beautiful person outside the ring—and even Andre the Ugly might have attested to that.

Inside Wrestling ratings

March 1979

WWWF

World champion: Bob Backlund

1. Peter Maivia
2. Greg Valentine
3. Ernie Ladd
4. Dusty Rhodes
5. Ivan Koloff
6. Ivan Putski
7. Jay Strongbow
8. Victor Rivera
9. Crusher Blackwell
10. Tony Garea

NWA

World champion: Harley Race

1. Dusty Rhodes
2. Andre the Giant
3. Ric Flair
4. Ken Patera
5. Rick Steamboat
6. Masked Superstar
7. Jack Brisco
8. Bruiser Brody
9. Mr. Wrestling II
10. Ted DiBiase

TAG TEAMS

1. Tony Garea & Larry Zbyszko
2. Pat Patterson & Ray Stevens
3. Baron Von Raschke & Greg Valentine
4. The Valiant Brothers
5. David & Kevin Von Erich
6. Terry Funk & Dory Funk Jr.
7. Greg Gagne & Jim Brunzell
8. Jack & Jerry Brisco
9. The Lumberjacks
10. Pedro Morales & Chavo Guerrero

MOST POPULAR

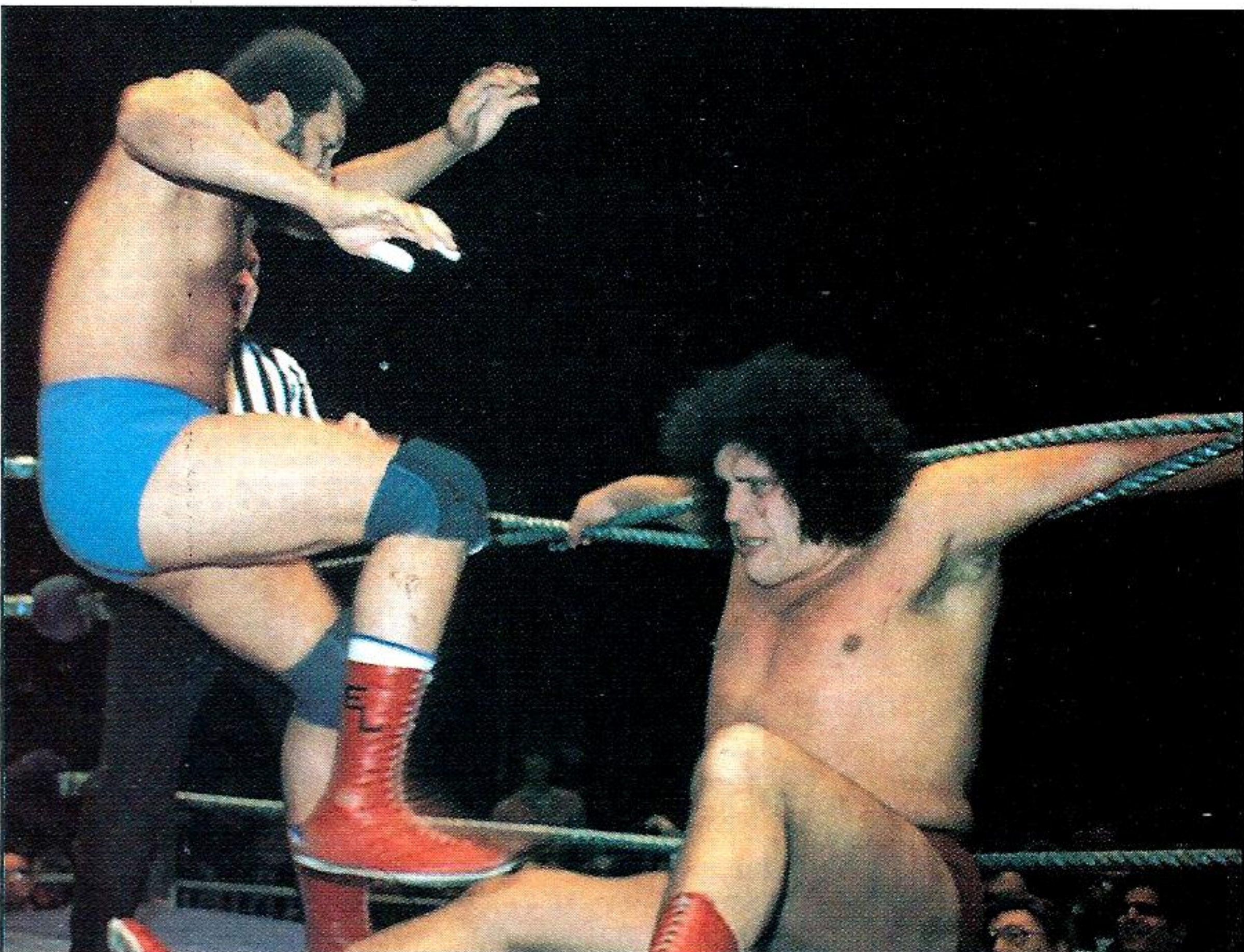
1. Dusty Rhodes
2. Andre the Giant
3. Rick Steamboat
4. Bob Backlund
5. Dino Bravo
6. Mr. Wrestling II
7. Ivan Putski
8. Jerry Brisco
9. Jim Brunzell
10. David Von Erich

MOST HATED

1. Paul Jones
2. Ric Flair
3. Peter Maivia
4. Greg Valentine
5. Superstar Graham
6. Victor Rivera
7. Ivan Koloff
8. Bruiser Brody
9. The Sheik
10. Abdullah the Butcher



To gain the upper hand against Andre, the "Big Cat" usually resorted to illegal tactics, including his infamous taped thumb, which he claimed was from an old football injury (above). Once Andre was vulnerable, ol' number 99 eagerly put his boots to him (below).



The next reason is that I don't think aliens who bring foreign diseases into my country should be allowed to wrestle here. They aren't sanitary, and they don't know the first thing about hygiene, taking care of their bodies or brushing their teeth. And they don't learn the language.

Now why should I want some frog like Andre coming in here and getting rich on Uncle Sam's money? Why doesn't he go back to where he came from? I don't need his kind infesting the sport I rule.

Not that I need any more reasons, but there are a couple more. Andre passes himself off as undefeated. Who has he wrestled who is any good but me? All the guys he's faced are bums, piddling mediocrities who cannot compare with the greatest of my skills and the enormity of my potential.

That's why I hate Andre the Ugly. He acts as if he's good. Anyone with half a brain knows he wins by cheating. He carries a foreign object strapped to his boot. I know. I've had it used on me. Then he whines to the ref that I'm the one using an illegal substance.

That's the type of creature Andre the Ugly is. But there's one last reason. It's the biggie. It's the reason why I want to behead Andre. When I think about it, my powerful hands form twin demons of destruction.

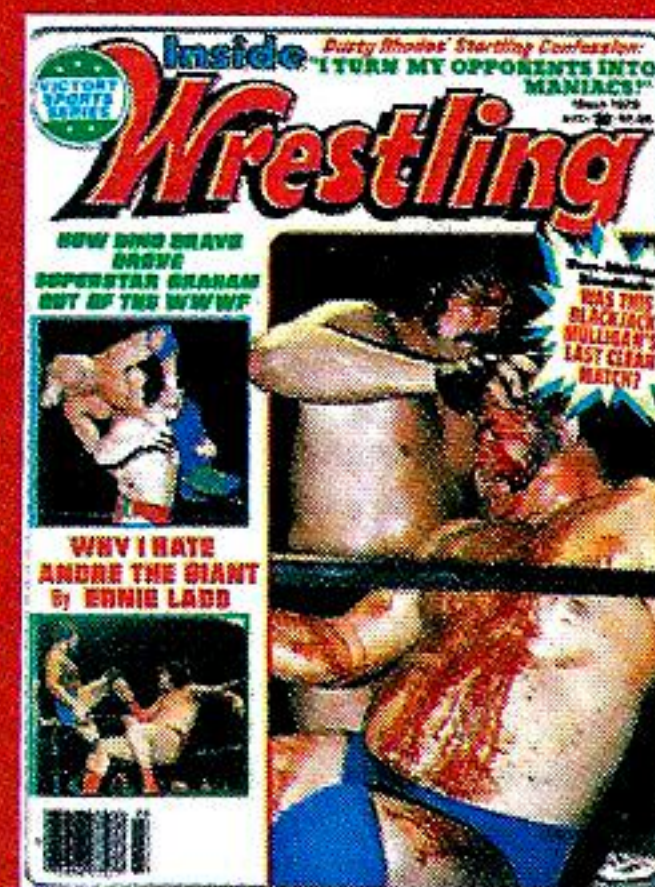
Andre pays off referees. That disgraces the sport. I am an honest, fair wrestler who would never use a dirty trick. But Andre slips the refs money. Lots of money. I don't know where he gets it. Maybe from the little old ladies that are his only fans.

But he pays them off. They look the other way when he cheats. Andre the Ugly is nothing but a bum. And I'm real pleased to have the opportunity to finally expose him.

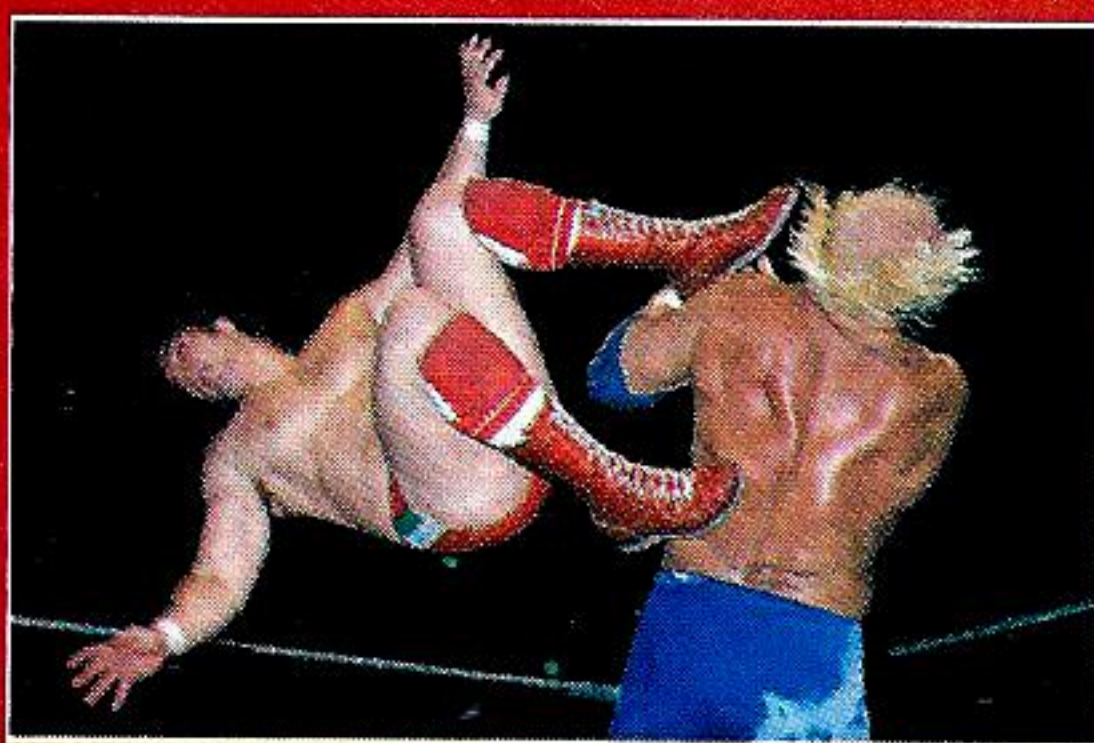
That's why I hate Andre the Ugly. Now, don't you hate him, too? □

Inside Wrestling, March 1979

The Cover: Few people trusted Blackjack Mulligan when he broke away from his running buddies, Ric Flair and Greg Valentine, and proclaimed his newfound dedication to scientific wrestling. Some suggested that he was merely posing as a fan favorite, hoping that would help him get a shot against despised NWA World champion Harley Race. When Mulligan finally received a title match, and countered Race's rulebreaking tactics with some savagery of his own, many predicted that Mulligan would return to the dark side in the near future. Fortunately, he did not.

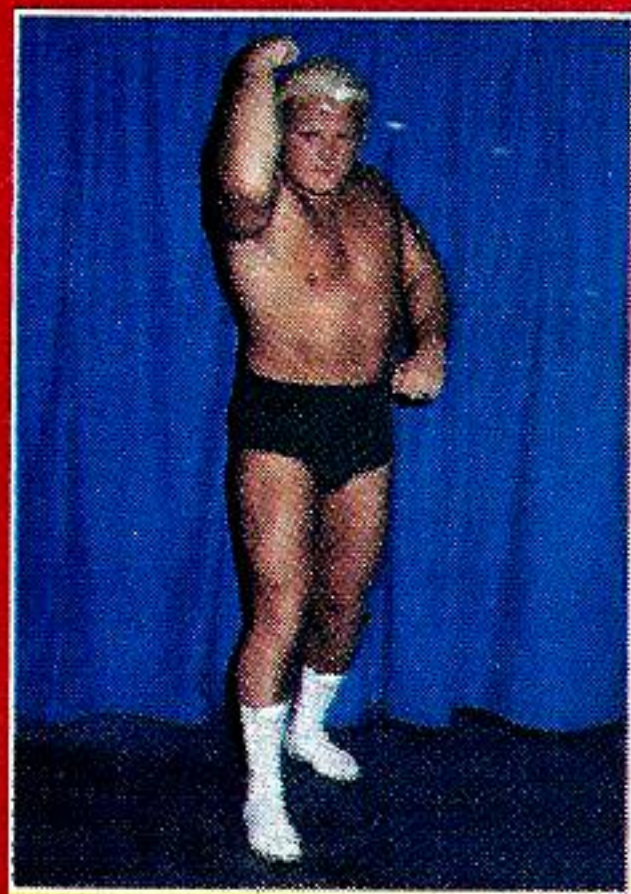
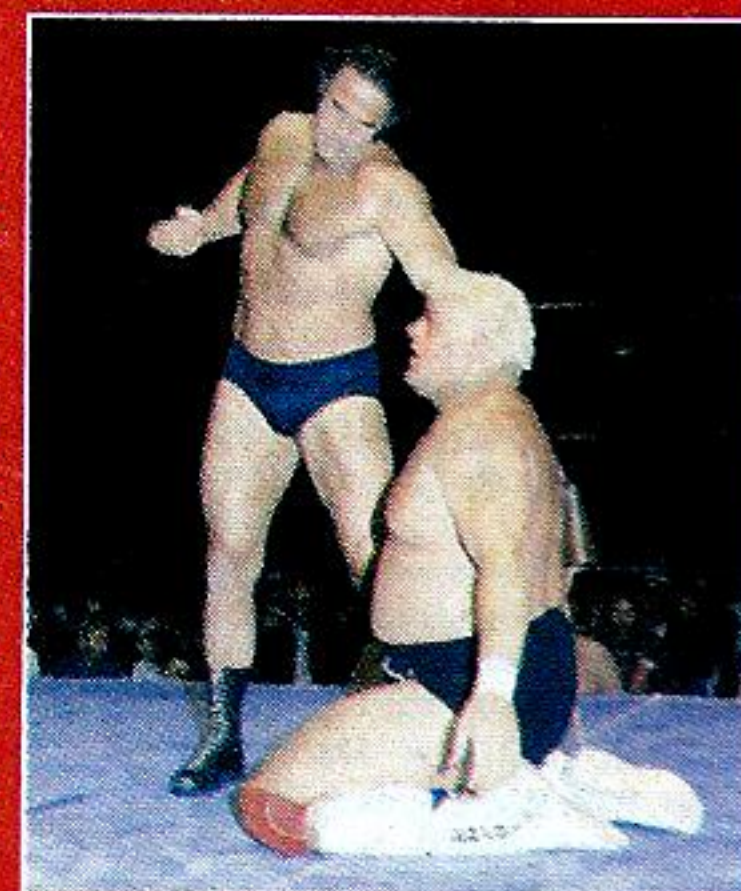


Bravo To Dino: Canadian star Dino Bravo was pursuing the record for the longest undefeated streak consisting of wins under 15 minutes. Lou Thesz set the record in 1949 with 142 victories. In a Madison Square Garden encounter, Superstar Graham kept his eye on the scoreboard clock and used stalling tactics to string out the match past the 15-minute mark.



Bravo was so furious that he viciously attacked Graham and was disqualified. His streak was halted at 69 wins, placing him 10th on the all-time list. But his match wasn't a total loss. Graham left the WWWF to avoid facing Bravo in a rematch.

Maniac Maker: Why did the very mention of Dusty Rhodes' name infuriate most rulebreakers? Was it his bleach-blond hair, his unconventional physique, or his lispy taunts? As another showdown with "Maniac" Mark Lewin approached in Texas, Rhodes began to wonder why heels hated him so much. According to a well-placed source in the rulebreaking community, they hated Rhodes because he wanted it both ways: He brawled and broke the rules, but was still adored by the fans and press. If nothing else, this story proved that heels hate hypocrites.



Vicious Valentine: By the late-1970s, Greg Valentine had earned a reputation as a sadist. In this "Hotseat" interview with Gary Morgenstein, Valentine confirmed that he took pleasure in maiming his opponents. Although "The Hammer" shared the NWA World tag team title with Baron Von Raschke, he was eager to secure a shot against WWWF champion Bob Backlund. The interview included gems such as, "All that counts is for Blackjack Mulligan to get his face wasted," and, "It would be fun tearing open Backlund's face." Nice guy.



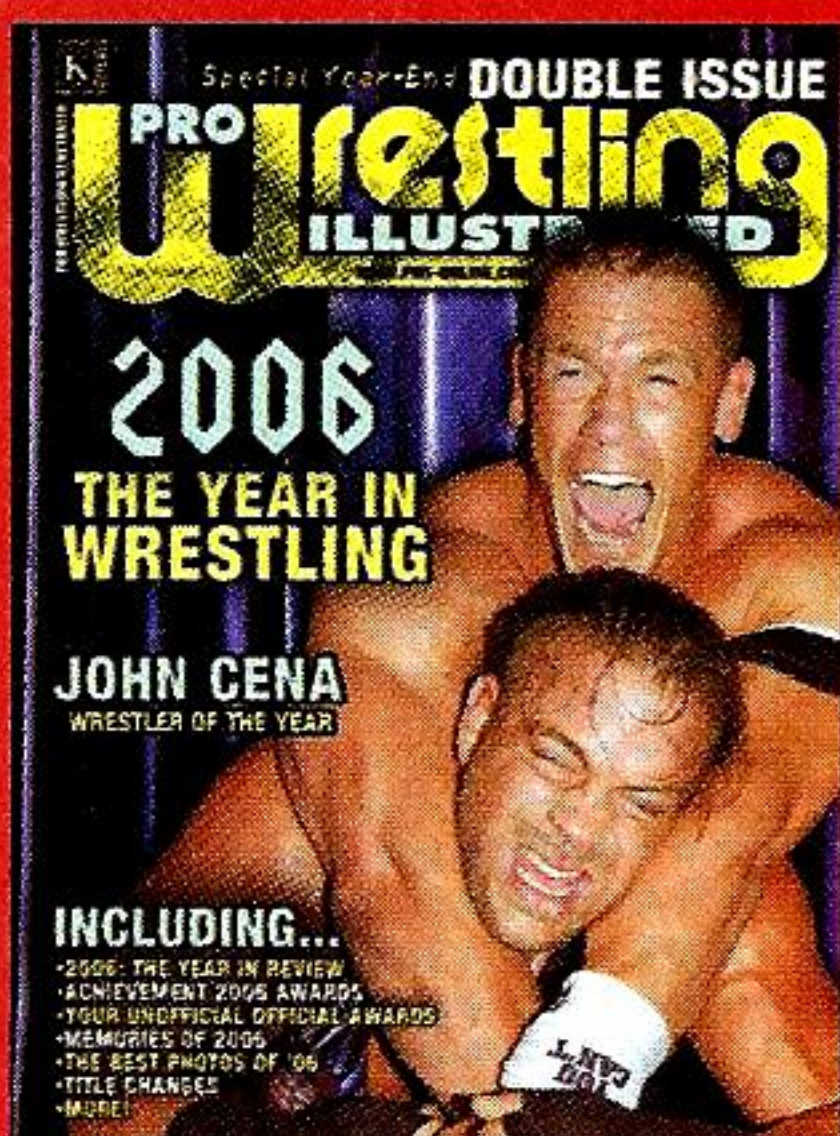
Stan The Silly Man: Associate Editor Randy Gordon had just survived a very trying night. In "Behind The Dressing Room Door," Gordon recounted how Austin Idol and Don Kent tampered with his rental car and about his exhausting red-eye flight from Detroit to New York City. With no sleep, Gordon still made an editorial meeting at 9 a.m.—and in walks Stan "The Man" Stasiak. He expected the worst from the hated former WWWF champion, yet Stasiak was in a light-hearted mood and even donned a Mil Mascaras mask. Gordon was relieved ... but too tired to truly appreciate Stasiak's antics.

between falls

PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED welcomes readers' comments on any of our stories or columns.

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Or you can e-mail your comments to
prowrestlingillustrated@yahoo.com

THE FINAL WORD



Our readers wait 12 months every year to see which wrestlers win the top categories in our "Achievement Awards" section. And when they finally do learn the outcome of their carefully considered ballots, they are quick to respond to the results.

"I am so glad Matt Cappotelli got the Inspirational Wrestler of the Year Award. His faith-based battle with cancer is by far more inspiring than any other option," contributed Kinsley, Kansas, resident Emmett Duncan.

Leslie Watson of Pembina, North Dakota, was thrilled to see Trish Stratus make her fourth appearance as *PWI's* Woman of the Year: "I thought she would lose a lot of votes because of her retirement, but her fans did not let her down."

Some agreed with our awards; others—not so much. One such voter was Elijah Anthony of Belleville, Michigan. "Boogeyman? Seriously? The Boogeyman hasn't even been around recently, and readers vote him as Rookie of the Year? Somewhere Charles Evans is considering a career-change because of this atrocity!"

SINKING IN A SEA OF TALENT

WrestleMania is the grandfather of pay-per-views, but I'm beginning to see how the WWE brand extension is over-saturating it. I'm glad the brand extension allows WWE to have separate divisions, like the NFL and NBA do. However, I don't see how Vince McMahon can put Raw, Smackdown, and ECW on the same show and expect to do justice to any of the brands.

Sure, all WWE wrestlers, regardless of the brand, work hard and deserve to be at WrestleMania. However, if they all appeared, the event would go five hours or more. The fans would not watch it. Even now, there's too much filler and deserving stars get left out. Secondary championships, such as the Intercontinental and U.S. titles, don't receive the emphasis they should.

The May 2002 issue of *PWI* took a special look at the brand extension and offered suggestions as to how it should be implemented ("The 'Mania To End All 'Manias: What Will Wrestling Look Like By WM X-9?"). I have a few ideas of my own: If other sports have end-of-season tournaments, WWE should have a tournament to determine the top brand each year. Have the two finalists meet at WrestleMania

for a title. The winner can choose a title shot at one of the top three titles, and that match can be held later in the evening.

If WWE does this, WrestleMania will become more relevant. If not, it'll get watered down and go the way of NWA/WCW Starrcade. Oh, I forgot. Starrcade no longer exists.

HUNT AGOSTA
Panama City, FL

RHODES TO HOF

I thoroughly enjoyed Dusty Rhodes' acceptance speech at the WWE Hall of Fame. Here is a man who was a great

Dusty Rhodes' induction into the WWE Hall of Fame was a long time coming. Rey Sifuentes Jr. of Kingsville, Texas, was glad to see the honor given to such a deserving legend of the game.

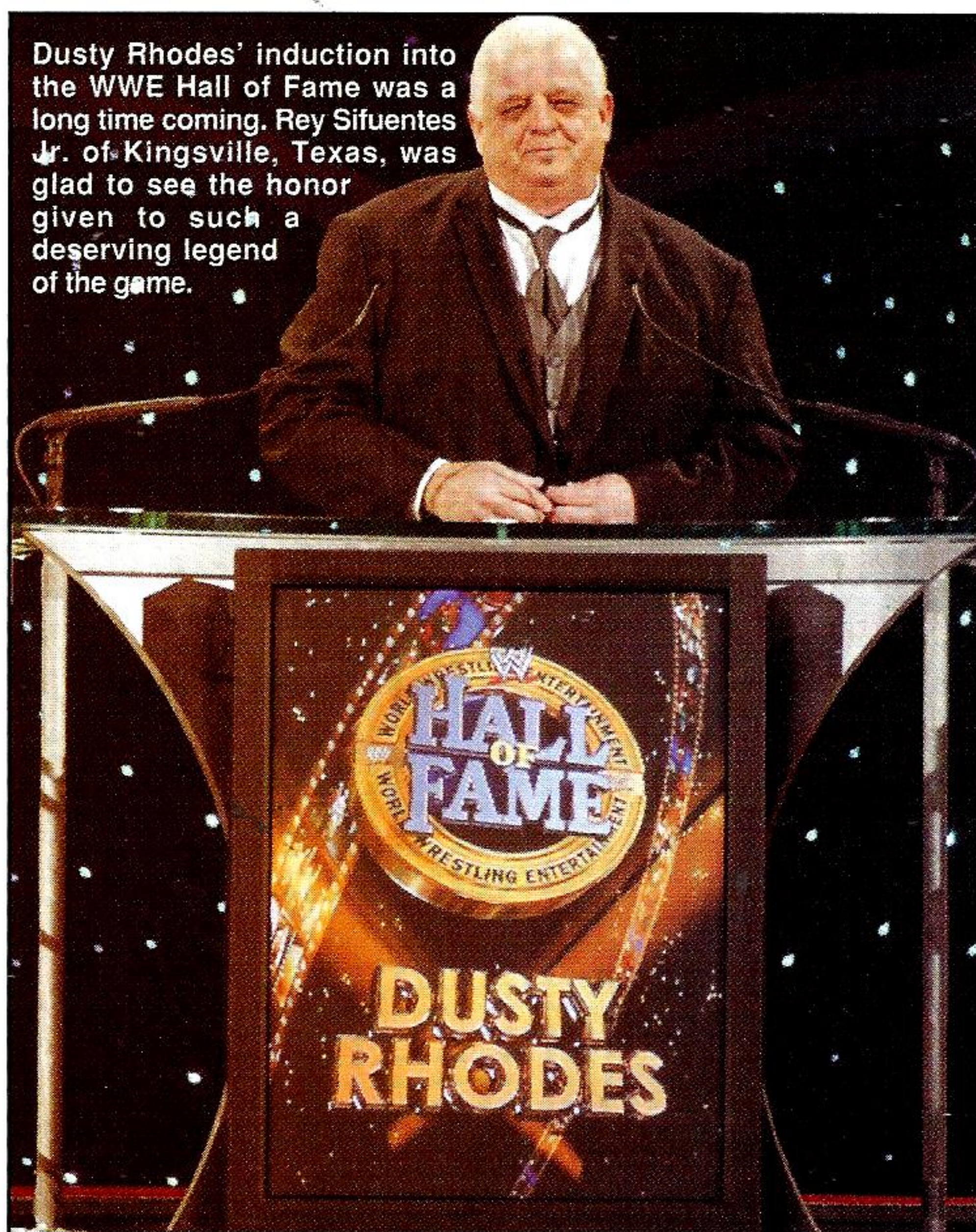


Photo by George Napolitano

wrestler back when the business did not receive the mainstream attention that it gets now. He truly is the "American Dream" and a real "people's champion." Also, I am happy to see wrestlers—like Steve Austin—getting movie roles as a way to keep working. Wrestling takes a physical toll on wrestlers' bodies, and I am always happy to see one of them able to walk away from the sport and into something else. Mark my words. One day, The Rock will win an Academy Award.

REY SIFUENTES JR.
Kingsville, TX

THE ERA OF CHRISTIAN

Here's a letter primarily addressed to Christian Cage:

I think you should leave TNA, and then go back to WWE in November 2007. You see, WWE eras typically last three years. The Evolution era started in the summer of 2002 and ended at Vengeance 2005. The very next night on Raw was the first official night of the John Cena-Batista era. That means, next year, we will be entering a new era. And you, Christian Cage, could be one of the two champs on either Smackdown or Raw.

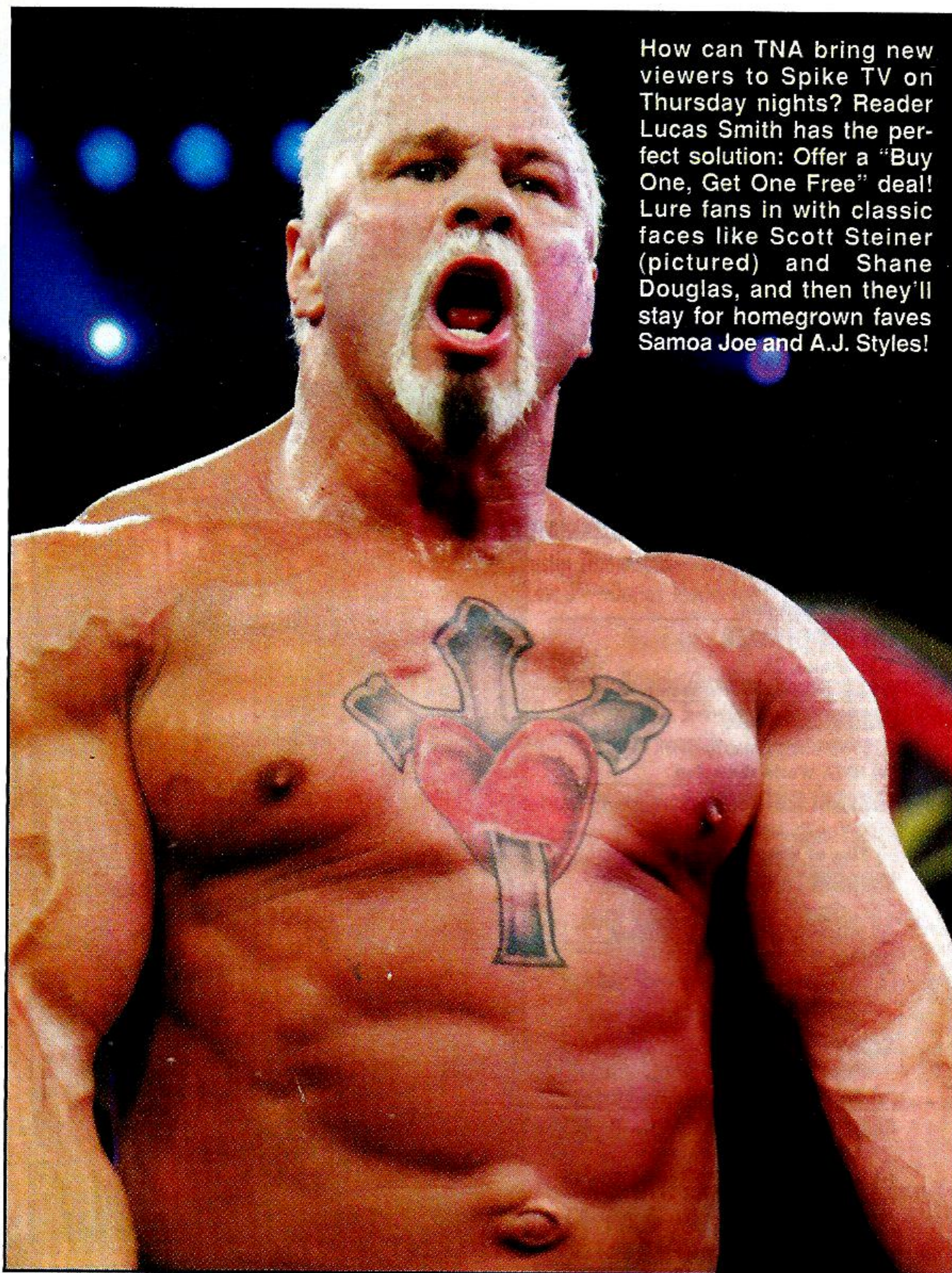
Who knows. Maybe we will get to see a Christian Cage/Edge era. After all, Edge is playing a big role in the current era. Remember, The Rock played a big part in the Austin/"Attitude" era. Then came his own era, which he shared with Triple-H. So this is the perfect chance for a Christian Cage/Edge era.

Christian, if you leave TNA now and return to WWE in November, you will even have time for a five-month vacation. In WWE, you would even have a shot at starring in your own movie. Something from the action/comedy genre would be perfect for you. When you come back to WWE, you would have more peeps than ever.

JESSE ADAMS
Millsboro, OH

DEFENDING VETERANS

Scott Steiner vs. Shane Douglas. This feud needs to go down. I know Douglas is retired, but surely "The Franchise" has a couple of good matches left in him. Just imagine the interviews, two of the



How can TNA bring new viewers to Spike TV on Thursday nights? Reader Lucas Smith has the perfect solution: Offer a "Buy One, Get One Free" deal! Lure fans in with classic faces like Scott Steiner (pictured) and Shane Douglas, and then they'll stay for homegrown faves Samoa Joe and A.J. Styles!

best in the business going toe to toe. The matches would be hard-hitting and fun to watch. I know Vince Russo could make this one a moneymaker. In my mind, it is a true dream feud that would have star-power and intensity. It could take TNA to the next level.

A lot of people have been bashing TNA for giving veterans the top spots, but what people should realize is that Alex Wright and Jean-Paul Levesque weren't what skyrocketed WCW to number one in the industry. Hulk Hogan and Randy Savage were the ones who put butts in seats. Guys like Steiner and Sting are the 50-percent-off sale on chips at the grocery store: They bring you in, but hopefully you will pick up some homegrown products (like Samoa Joe or A.J. Styles) and come back for those again. You

can't bring anybody in with the unfamiliar stuff.

LUCAS SMITH
luc_dawg9@yahoo.ca

A WWE-TNA ALLIANCE?

Will Vince McMahon ever let WWE become great again, like it was during Steve Austin's time? The key to this is working with TNA, not killing it off like he did WCW and the old ECW. And, of course, the new ECW has been in crisis since it came back this year.

If Vince could work out some kind of deal by which TNA wrestlers could appear on Raw, Smackdown, or ECW, wrestling would be huge again. I know this is unconventional thinking, but what do WWE or TNA have to lose?

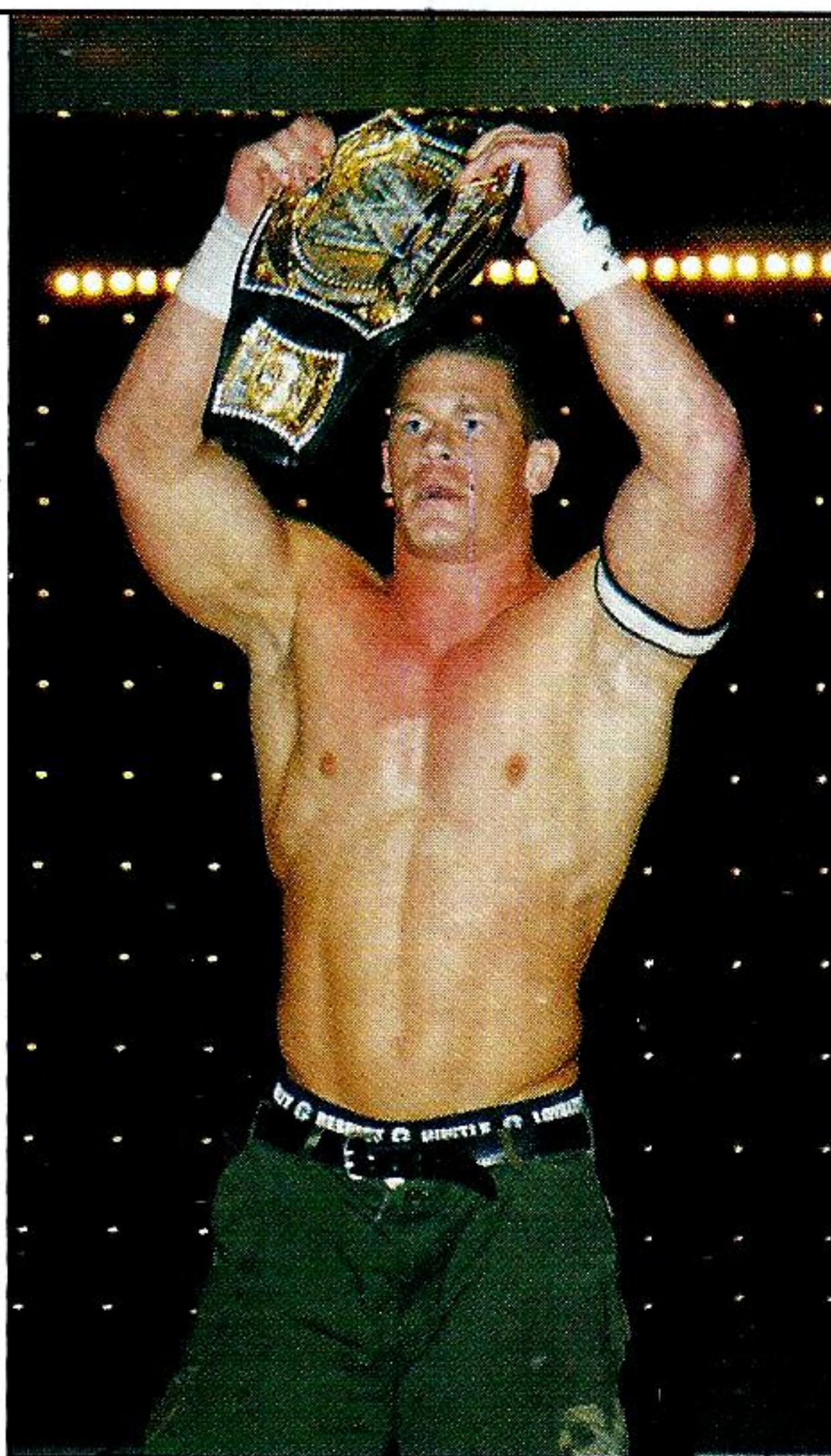
ADAM HOOPER
Feltham, U.K. □

PWI official ratings

For period ended April 12, 2007

TOP 10

- 1 JOHN CENA**
260, West Newbury, MA
(1) Raw World champion
- 2 BOBBY LASHLEY**
255, Topeka, KS
(3) ECW champion
- 3 THE UNDERTAKER**
304, Dallas, TX
(7) Smackdown World champion
- 4 CHRISTIAN CAGE**
225, Toronto, Ontario
(4) NWA World champion
- 5 TAKESHI MORISHIMA**
297, Tokyo, Japan
(-) Ring of Honor champion
- 6 HIROSHI TANAHASHI**
227, Ogaki, Japan
(6) IWGP heavyweight champion
- 7 BATISTA**
318, Washington, DC
(2) No. 1 contender: SD World title
- 8 SHAWN MICHAELS**
217, San Antonio, TX
(8) No. 1 contender: Raw World title
- 9 KEN KENNEDY**
246, Minneapolis, MN
(-) No. 2 contender: SD World title
- 10 C.M. PUNK**
210, Chicago, IL
(-) No. 1 contender: ECW title



John Cena

TAG TEAMS

- 1 PAUL LONDON & BRIAN KENDRICK**
Combined weight: 380 pounds
(3) Smackdown World tag team champions
- 2 MATT & JEFF HARDY**
Combined weight: 425 pounds
(-) Raw World tag team champions
- 3 HOMICIDE & HERNANDEZ**
Combined weight: 495 pounds
(1) NWA World tag team champions
- 4 LANCE CADE & TREVOR MURDOCH**
Combined weight: 502 pounds
(-) No. 1 contenders: Raw World tag team title
- 5 CODY RHODES & SHAWN SPEARS**
Combined weight: 467 pounds
(6) OVW Southern tag team champions
- 6 DEUCE & DOMINO**
Combined weight: 497 pounds
(4) No. 1 contenders: SD World tag team title
- 7 RIC FLAIR & CARLITO**
Combined weight: 463 pounds
(-) No. 2 contenders: Raw World tag team title
- 8 GIANT BERNARD & TRAVIS TOMKO**
Combined weight: 645 pounds
(-) IWGP International tag team champions
- 9 B.G. JAMES & KIP JAMES**
Combined weight: 515 pounds
(-) No. 1 contenders: NWA World tag team title
- 10 JAY & MARK BRISCOE**
Combined weight: 390 pounds
(-) Ring of Honor tag team champions

WWE RAW

Raw World Champion:

JOHN CENA

(C) 260, West Newbury, MA

- 1—SHAWN MICHAELS**
(1) 217, San Antonio, TX
- 2—UMAGA**
(3) 348, Isle of Samoa
- 3—EDGE**
(4) 240, Toronto, Ontario
- 4—JEFF HARDY**
(2) 212, Cameron, NC
- 5—THE GREAT KHALI**
(6) 408, Bombay, India
- 6—CARLITO**
(7) 220, San Juan, Puerto Rico
- 7—KENNY DYKSTRA**
(5) 234, Worcester, MA
- 8—RANDY ORTON**
(10) 245, St. Louis, MO
- 9—CHRIS MASTERS**
(9) 270, Santa Monica, CA
- 10—RIC FLAIR**
(-) 243, Charlotte, NC

WWE SMACKDOWN

Smackdown World Champion:

THE UNDERTAKER

(1) 304, Dallas, TX

- 1—BATISTA**
(C) 318, Washington, DC
- 2—KEN KENNEDY**
(3) 246, Minneapolis, MN
- 3—FINLAY**
(5) 230, Belfast, Ireland
- 4—CHRIS BENOIT**
(2) 224, Edmonton, Alberta
- 5—MATT HARDY**
(-) 213, Cameron, NC
- 6—MVP**
(-) 252, Miami, FL
- 7—KANE**
(6) 326, St. Louis, MO
- 8—THE MIZ**
(8) 210, Parma, OH
- 9—KING BOOKER**
(4) 250, Houston, TX
- 10—CHAVO GUERRERO JR.**
(7) 210, El Paso, TX

ECW

ECW Champion:

BOBBY LASHLEY

(C) 255, Topeka, KS

- 1—C.M. PUNK**
(1) 210, Chicago, IL
- 2—ROB VAN DAM**
(2) 237, Battle Creek, MI
- 3—MARCUS COR VON**
(8) 275, Saginaw, MI
- 4—SABU**
(4) 220, Bombay, India
- 5—ELIJAH BURKE**
(6) 230, Jacksonville, FL
- 6—SNITSKY**
(-) 310, Nesquehoning, PA
- 7—HARDCORE HOLLY**
(3) 249, Mobile, AL
- 8—KEVIN THORN**
(7) 270, Memphis, TN
- 9—MAHONEY**
(9) 361, Nutley, NJ
- 10—MATT STRIKER**
(-) 215, Bayside, NY

TNA

NWA World Champion:

CHRISTIAN CAGE

(C) 225, Toronto, Ontario

- 1—KURT ANGLE**
(1) 233, Pittsburgh, PA
- 2—STING**
(3) 255, Venice Beach, CA
- 3—CHRIS SABIN**
(4) 207, Detroit, MI
- 4—SAMOA JOE**
(5) 270, Isle of Samoa
- 5—ABYSS**
(2) 295, parts unknown
- 6—RHINO**
(6) 275, Detroit, MI
- 7—A.J. STYLES**
(10) 202, Gainesville, GA
- 8—JAY LETHAL**
(-) 192, Elizabeth, NJ
- 9—JAMES STORM**
(7) 225, Franklin, TN
- 10—AUSTIN STARR**
(-) 202, Milwaukee, WI

Top 10 and Tag Team ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or team. These ratings are compiled by the magazine's editorial board. All other ratings are based on the official current positions of challengers to the top title in each category; certain titleholders receive an automatic spot in the ratings. The number in parentheses indicates a wrestler's position in that category last issue; (-) indicates that the wrestler was not rated in that category last issue, while (C) indicates the wrestler was champion in that category last issue.

ANARCHY CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Showtime Summers; 1—Rexx Reed; 2—Nigel McGuinness; 3—Mike Dell; 4—Arik Cannon; 5—Sharkboy; 6—Darin Childs; 7—Skylar Skelly; 8—Scotty Riggs; 9—Jaykus Plisken; 10—Rachel Summerlyn.

AWA SUPREME CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Billy Maverick; 1—Damien Divine; 2—Nic Noble; 3—Ricky Ruckus; 4—C.J. Popp; 5—Eric Draven; 6—John Strattlin; 7—William Valentine; 8—Spazz; 9—The Regulator; 10—Brandon Hunter.

AWA WORLD-1: Champion—Ricky Landell; 1—Glacier; 2—Dustin Rhodes; 3—Chasyn Rance; 4—Scotty Riggs; 5—Jon Davis; 6—Roderick Strong; 7—Vordell Walker; 8—Tully Blanchard; 9—Francisco Ciatso; 10—Sean Davis.

CAROLINA WRESTLING ENTERTAINMENT: Champion—Scotty Matthews; 1—Bounty Hunter; 2—Aaron Devil; 3—D.J. P-Roc; 4—Rick Link; 5—J-Synn; 6—Leroy Greene; 7—Jaheem the Dream; 8—ScrapYard Dog; 9—D.Z. Hyde; 10—Paroah.

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION: Champion—Aden Chambers; 1—Bryan Logan; 2—Rob Eckos; 3—Secret Weapon; 4—Glen Osbourne; 5—Billy Bax; 6—Frederick of Hollywood; 7—Kermon the German; 8—Mike Reed; 9—Ace Darling; 10—Max Von Bauer.

FULL IMPACT PRO: Champion—Roderick Strong; 1—Erick Stevens; 2—Shingo; 3—Jay Briscoe; 4—Davey Richards; 5—Delirious; 6—Larry Sweeny; 7—Mark Briscoe; 8—Chasyn Rance; 9—Colt Cabana; 10—Sal Rinauro.

MID-SOUTH WRESTLING ALLIANCE: Champion—Ryan Davidson; 1—Draven Cross; 2—Tyler Bateman; 3—Cody Jones; 4—Michael Faith; 5—Jeff

Knight; 6—Prince al-Farat; 7—Bad Boy; 8—Glen Steel; 9—3rd Rail; 10—Tyson James

NATIONAL INDEPENDENT CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Ken Steel; 1—Scotty Blaze; 2—Dustin Daniels; 3—Wyld Chyld; 4—Knightstalker; 5—Damien James; 6—Scott Lee; 7—Darius Mackleford; 8—Buddy Love; 9—Joe Poore; 10—El Scorpiono.

NEW AGE WRESTLING: Champion—Bruiser Graham; 1—Jaime Morris; 2—Leslie Paige; 3—Scotty Rucker; 4—Shawn Cruz; 5—Mike Williams; 6—Rick Kelly; 7—Scott Raines; 8—Jason Phillips; 9—Joe Powers Jr.; 10—Shocker.

RIVER CITY WRESTLING: Champion—Masada; 1—Sicodelico Jr.; 2—Ikaika; 3—Hotstuff Hernandez; 4—Mike Dell; 5—Mike Foxx; 6—Don Juan; 7—Chris Marval; 8—Franco D'Angelo; 9—Rory Fox; 10—Joey Spector

SOONER WORLD CLASS WRESTLING: Champion—Rick Garrett; 1—Kareem Sadat; 2—Timothy J. Rockwell; 3—Bernard Funk; 4—3rd Rail; 5—James Warbois; 6—Luscious Larry; 7—Prophet; 8—Striker; 9—Luc Lapointe; 10—Beau Dalton.

WORLD CLASS EXTREME WRESTLING: Champion—Corey Edsel; 1—Tommy Vandal; 2—Aaron Devil; 3—Tre G.; 4—Hangtime; 5—Ali Steele; 6—Josh Hunter; 7—Damian Kage; 8—Tito Rain; 9—Dick Foley; 10—D.Z. Hyde.

WORLD REVOLUTIONS ENTERTAINMENT: Champion—John Deaton; 1—Randy Deaton; 2—Keri; 3—Rocky Gilmore; 4—Nugene Ledbetter Jr.; 5—Joshua La Rue; 6—Mike Valentine; 7—David Cox; 8—Danger Zone Johnny; 9—Lindsey; 10—Samantha.

RING OF HONOR

ROH Champion:

TAKESHI MORISHIMA

(-) 297, Tokyo, Japan

1—HOMICIDE

(C) 220, Brooklyn, NY

2—RODERICK STRONG

(4) 205, Tampa, FL

3—DELIRIOUS

(1) 192, parts unknown

4—BRENT ALBRIGHT

(-) 230, Bayside, CA

5—NIGEL MCGUINNESS

(5) 220, London, England

6—MATT SYDAL

(-) 177, St. Louis, MO

7—ADAM PEARCE

(-) 233, Chicago, IL

8—CLAUDIO CASTAGNOLI

(-) 238, Schaffhausen, Switz.

9—JIMMY JACOBS

(-) 169, Grand Rapids, MI

10—MASAAKI MOCHIZUKI

(-) 209, Tokyo, Japan

OVW

OVW Champion:

AARON STEVENS

(-) 237, Boston, MA

1—SHAWN SPEARS

(9) 235, Louisville, KY

2—PAUL BIRCHALL

(C) 281, Surrey, England

3—BORIS ALEXIEV

(1) 255, Moscow, Russia

4—MIKE KRUEL

(5) 210, New York, NY

5—CHET THE JET

(2) 230, Buffalo, NY

6—EDDIE KRAVEN

(3) 205, New York, NY

7—CODY RHODES

(-) 232, Marietta, GA

8—VLADIMIR KOZLOV

(-) 310, Moscow, Russia

9—FLASH FUNK

(-) 229, Denver, CO

10—JACOB DUNCAN

(4) 335, Louisville, KY

JAPAN

1—HIROSHI TANAHASHI

(1) 227, Ogaki, Japan

IWGP heavyweight champion

2—MINORU SUZUKI

(2) 220, Yokohama, Japan

All Japan Triple Crown champion

3—MITSU HARU MISAWA

(3) 228, Ashikaga, Japan

GHC heavyweight champion

4—NAOMICHI MARUFUJI

(4) 211, Saitama, Japan

5—YUJI NAGATA

(5) 228, Tokyo, Japan

6—SATOSHI KOJIMA

(6) 243, Tokyo, Japan

7—TAKESHI MORISHIMA

(8) 297, Tokyo, Japan

8—MINORU

(9) 198, Komaki, Japan

IWGP jr. heavyweight champion

9—JUSHIN LIGER

(-) 208, Hiroshima, Japan

10—HIROYOSHI TENZAN

(7) 270, Tokyo, Japan

MEXICO

1—MISTICO

(1) 177, Mexico City, Mexico

2—EL HIJO DEL SANTO

(2) 180, Tulancingo, Mexico

3—CIBERNETICO

(3) 175, Mexico City, Mexico

4—ATLANTIS

(5) 180, Guadalajara, Mexico

5—PERRO AGUAYO JR.

(4) 200, Zacatecas, Mexico

6—DR. WAGNER JR.

(6) 215, Mexico City, Mexico

7—LA PARKA

(7) 206, Sonora, Mexico

8—AVERNO

(8) 182, Mexico City, Mexico

9—LA PARK

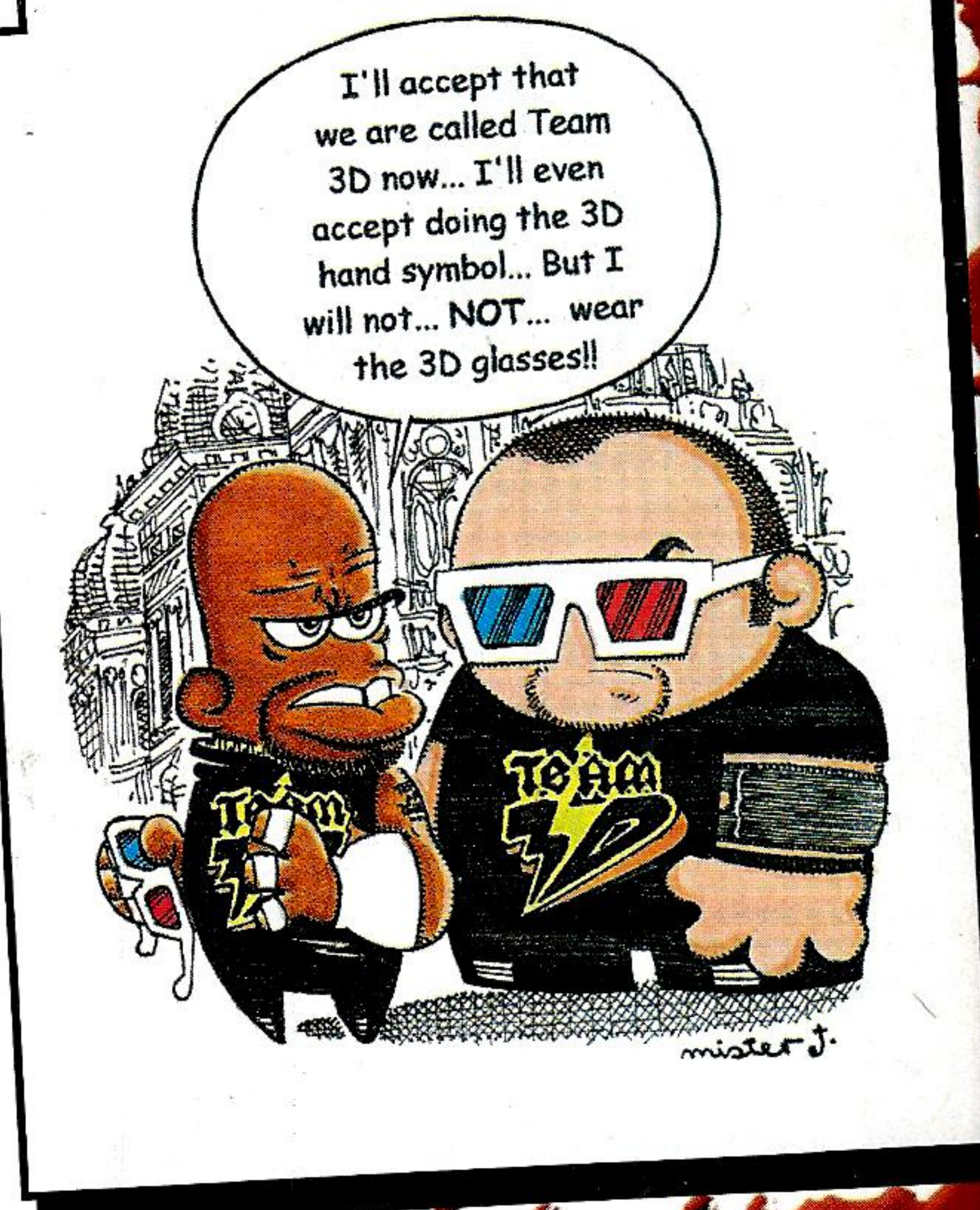
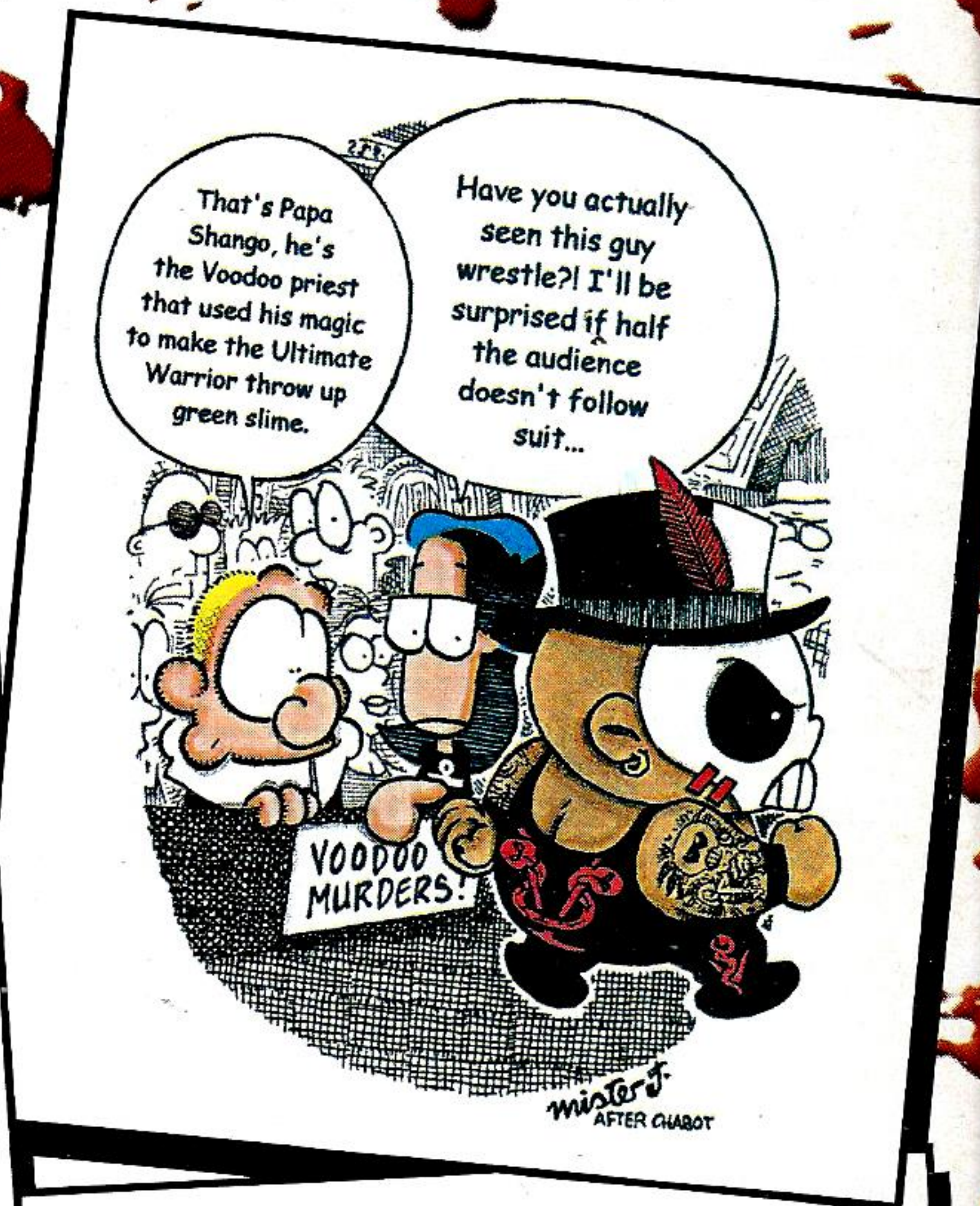
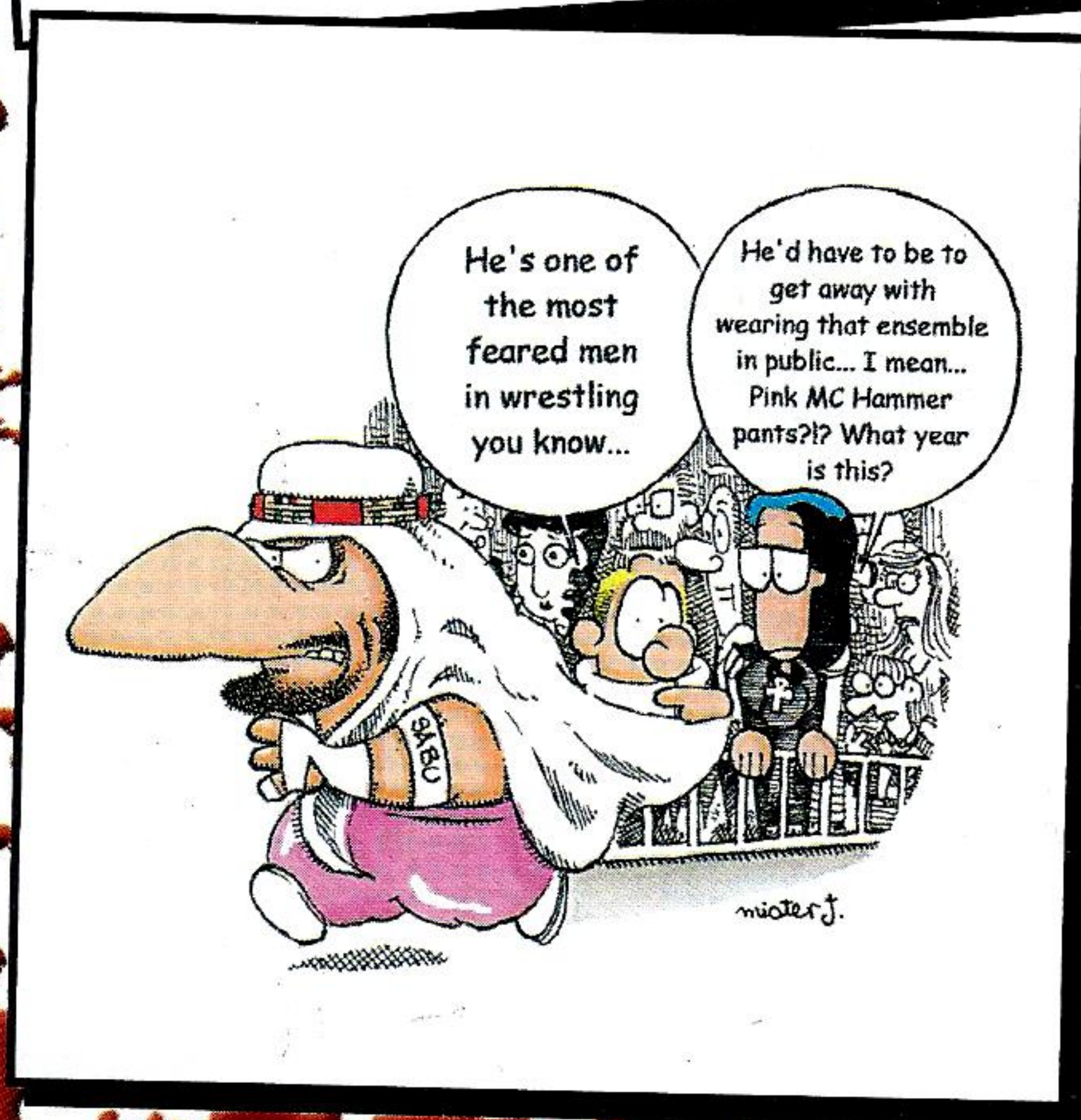
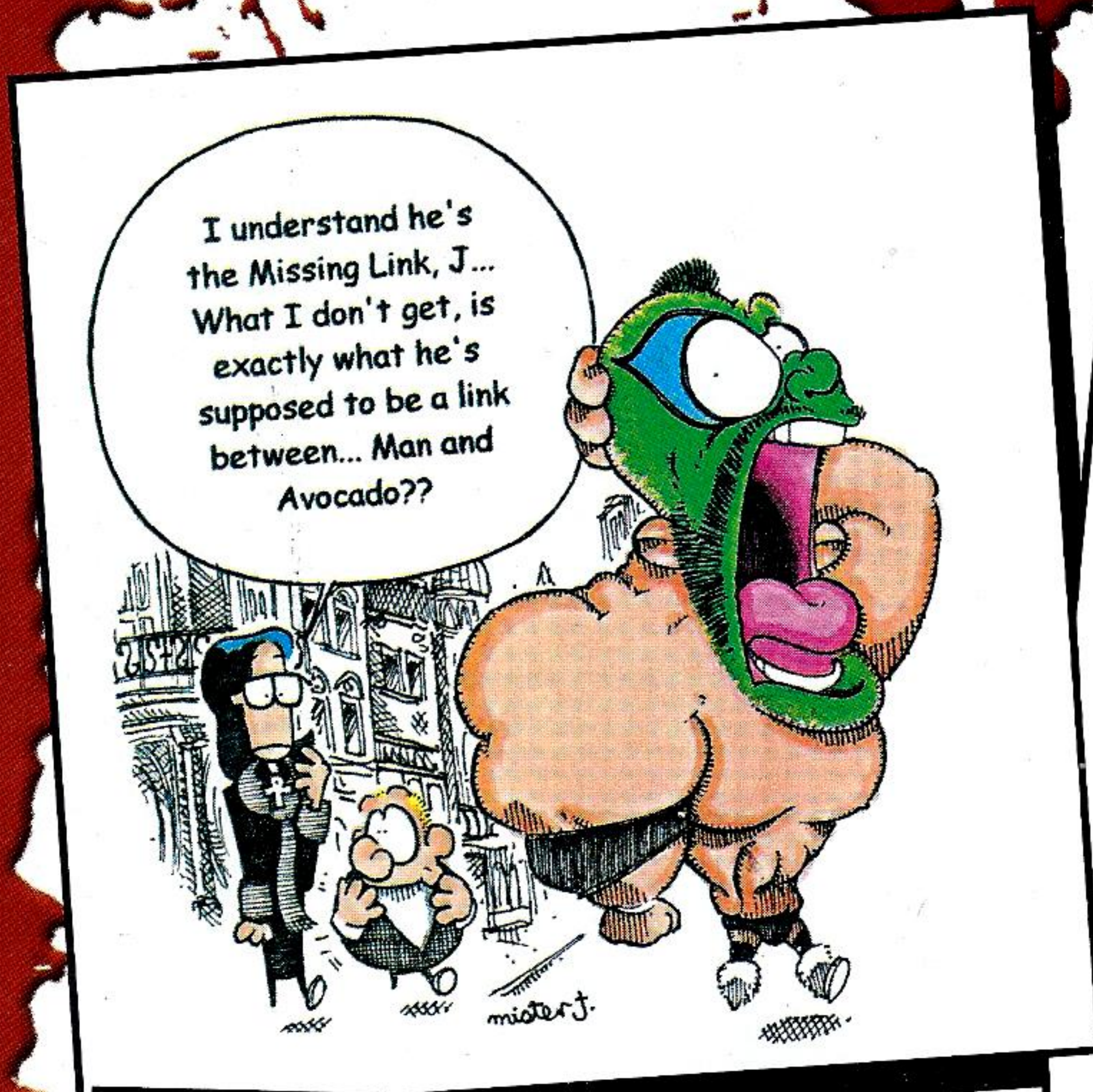
(10) 235, Torreon, Mexico

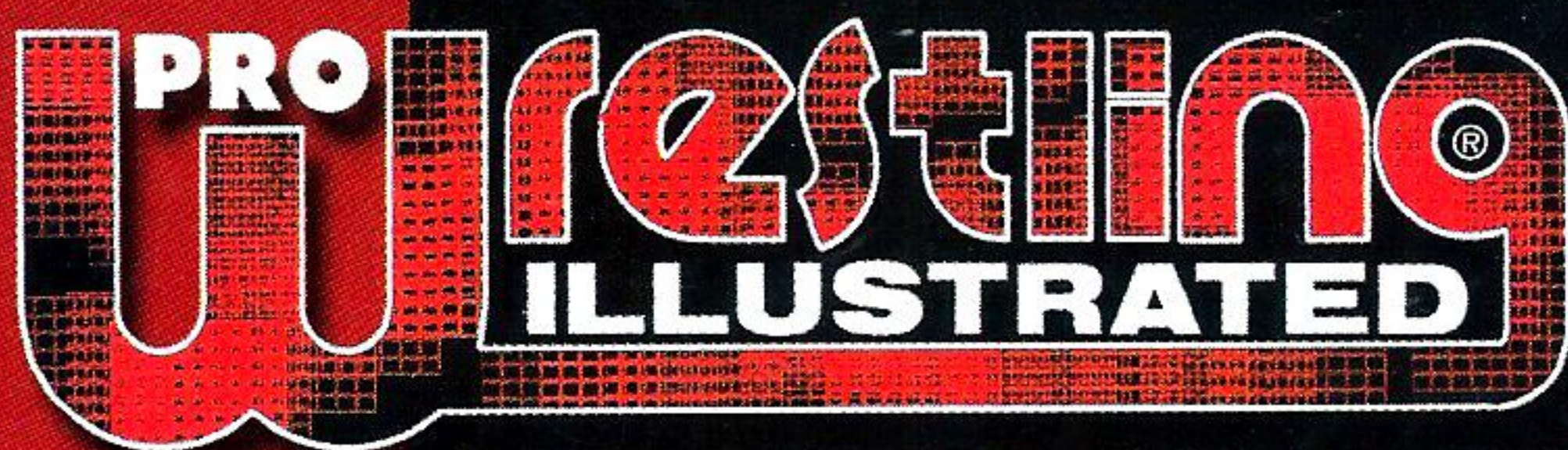
10—NEGRO CASAS

(9) 185, Mexico City, Mexico

Drawing Blood

By Jason Conlan





HOTLINE

Hosted by Jake Black

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